THE DIFFICULT MATTER: A READING OF THE POETRY OF J. H. PRYNNE

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> There have, of course, been revolutions in the history of art before to-day. There is a revolution with every new generation, and periodically, every century or so, we get a wider or deeper change of sensibility to which we give the name of a period...[but] I do think we can already discern a difference of kind in the contemporary revolution: it is not so much a revolution, which implies a turning-over, even a turning-back, but rather a break-up, a devolution, some would say a dissolution. Its character is catastrophic.[1]

Writing in 1933, Herbert Read recognised the significance of the Modernist revolution. The twentieth century brought a fervent atmosphere of new thought and new art. It called into question the entire cultural tradition of the West. Indeed, as Read himself goes on to say, "the aim of five centuries of European effort [was] openly abandoned".[2]

The main focus of this revolution was the perceived breakdown in the universalising and rationalist metanarratives of the Enlightenment, the grand theories which had grounded Western politics, art and ethics for the last two hundred and fifty years. Enlightenment philosophy, stemming from the rationalism of Descartes and Pierre Bayle, and the empiricism of Francis Bacon and John Locke, celebrated reason and scientific method. It believed in the existence of discoverable and universally valid principles which governed human beings, nature, and society. Immanuel Kant, often considered the greatest of modern philosophers, based his theories upon the acceptance of certain a priori grounds or foundations of knowledge, upon the idea that, among true propositions, some are true independently of experience, and remain true however experience varies.

This foundationalist philosophy persisted throughout the superseding periods of Romanticism and Realism. Although the Romantic movement countered the logical strictures of Neoclassical rationality with freer forms

of thought, a basic sense of foundationalism still remained. Reason was replaced by imagination, a cognitive faculty which the Romantics believed could apprehend the absolute reality which lay beyond the multiple appearances of the phenomenal world. Nineteenth century Realism similarly stems from traditional philosophies. It views art as the communication of a fundamental reality which exists prior to, and independently of, the act of communication.

It is against these foundationalist philosophies that Modernist movements in twentieth century art react. They define themselves against the orthodoxies which they supersede and subvert.

Any approach to ideas or literary texts through period concepts will necessarily be fraught with pitfalls and generalisations. General theories can never be total theories and can easily ossify into exclusive dogmas shutting out alternative perspectives. However, generalisations are needed to organise experience and, as long as it is realised that they cannot claim to account for everything, they can be ennabling. I intend, therefore, to begin this thesis with a broad outline of Modernist tendencies, of the characteristics which distinguish twentieth century movements in art from those which precede them. I then propose to go on to examine this overview a little more closely, dividing Modernist movements in art into two principal strands. The one, a strand stemming from the Symbolists and culminating in the twenties and thirties in the "high" or "classical" Modernism of Eliot, Auden or Yeats. The other, a distinct, yet contiguous, anti-Symbolist strand, effectuating what has since been termed a Postmodernist poetic.

The term, Modernism, is difficult to pin down. As Donald Davie writes: the break between Modernism and the past is a gulf which, though very "plain when we are 'on the spot', and very deep and wide", is nonetheless "hard to find on the map or to instruct the stranger where to look".[3] It is not a chronological designation. Although Faulkner's survey, *A Modernist Reader*, locates the dates with simplistic conviction at 1910-

1930, these dates are widened in other versions to anything between 1867, the year of Baudelaire's death, and 1945, the end of the Second World War. Broadly speaking, however, the first quarter of the twentieth century may be taken as the period of the most intense Modernist activity and, as Levenson[4] suggests, the founding of *The Criterion* in 1922 might be the best mark of Modernism's coming of age, in so far as it exemplifies the institutionalisation of its movements.

Modernism cannot be succinctly defined any more than it can be simply periodised. *The Oxford History of English Literature* makes no attempt, but settles instead to reproduce eight representative essays. Modernism is many stranded, embracing not only a wide variety of different things but a wide variety of conflicting things. It encompasses a wealth of movements: Impressionism, Postimpressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism, Imagism, Dadaism, Surrealism. The elusive multiplicity of Modernist thought is essentially irreducible to simple definition. Indeed, as Brooker writes: its "different perspectives and informing criteria do not add up. They do not together form a complete picture so much as cancel, subsume or contend with each other".[5]

This is not to say, however, that Modernist movements do not have a sense of their own distinctive identity. They are characterised by an intense self-awareness. The Modern Western world is probably the first civilisation in history to have tried to study itself objectively. Art, Peter Ackroyd writes in *Notes For a New Culture*, "comes to reside in its own formal investigation".[6] In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce introduces complex discussions of aesthetics into the text through his semi-autobiographical character, Stephen Daedelus.

From a critical vantage point in time, therefore, some sort of consensus has been reached as to what might constitute a Modernist style. Though it must be acknowledged that any such generalisation can only ever amount to a partial explanation, a limited selection from a plethora of aspects and details, it is with just such an overview that I intend now to begin.

Grouping together the diversity of Modernist movements under the one broad designation of "Modernism", I propose to offer a brief sketch of those more salient characteristics by which these movements have sought to distinguish themselves from traditional forms and techniques of expression.

The fundamentally defining characteristic of the Modernist revolution, as has already been suggested, is its strong and conscious break with the foundationalist notions of orthodox philosophy. Modernism, write Bradbury and McFarlane, is:

> the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions.[7]

Reality is recognised to be discontinuous and ambivalent. In a Christian world man had had faith in the ultimately redemptive wholeness of Christian grace. In a Humanist world man had believed in the secular saviour of evolving science. But by the twentieth century these foundational beliefs were tottering. Darwinian theories had shaken the basis of Christianity. Science had undergone a Modernist phase of its own. Its solid premises subverted by concepts such as relativity and indeterminacy, it was no longer able to underprop the world with rationalistic and positivistic assurances. Once man had looked towards traditional goals of progress, towards some notion of Utopia. Now there was only what Frye calls "dystopia...the nightmare of the future".[8] Formerly alienation was projected as the fear of Hell, he says, but now man's fears attach not to the world which will follow this one, but to the future of his own world. Alienation and progress are the two central elements in the mythology of the twentieth century, explains Frye, and alienation has become a psychological complex rooted in the sense that man has lost control of his own destiny.

Faced with the inadequacy of human reason, artists found themselves part of the absurd and anguished race of existential uncertainty. In a review

of *Ulysses*, Eliot speaks of the "immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is human history".[9] Hermione Roddice, writes Lawrence, "piled up her...defences of aesthetic knowledge, and culture, and world-visions, and disinterestedness. Yet she could never stop up the terrible gap of insufficiency".[10] The novels of Thomas Mann explore the dangerous, deathly magic of the creative impulse.

Modernist movements in art come to enact man's epistemological doubts, the fragmentations of a world in which knowledge is essentially pluralistic and ambiguous. Although the idea of duplicity in experience and being, of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, had existed since Classical times, never before had it been experienced so intensely. The Modernist text abandons all pretence of encompassing final truth. As Ezra Pound writes in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley":

> To be certain...certain
> (Amid aerial flowers)...time for arrangements -
> Drifted on
> To the final estrangement.[11]

Certainty degenerates into authorial ellipsis. Art can no longer be simply imitative or representational. It can no longer offer a single meaning, an interpretative gloss on a fixed and accepted reality. A "text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning...but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings...blend and clash",[12] explains Roland Barthes. "[M]ultiply variety / In a wilderness of mirrors", writes Eliot in "Gerontion".[13] The famous opening of Sartre's *Nausea* exposes and deflates the expectations of the meaning-hungry reader seeking semantic fixity.

Narrative closure is always denied for, however patient of interpretation, the work can never be explained. Art becomes experience. Process and potentiality are central to Modernism. "The world doesn't fear a new idea", writes Lawrence, "it can pigeonhole a new idea. But it can't pigeonhole a new experience".[14] The twentieth century witnessed the endless experiments of Stravinsky; Picasso's shifting from drawing to

painting to sculpture to pottery; the mixing and merging of Cubist collage. Valéry took the motto: "*ars non stagnat*".[15] In Hemingway's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* a polyglot series of synonyms runs through the mind of the dying writer: "Now, ahora, maintenant, heute..."[16] One life passes into the next, one language into another. The finality of signification is replaced by a sense of imminence.

The notion of a poem ever reaching an ending becomes a relative one. "Un poeme n'est jamais achève",[17] writes Valéry. Gide wrote his novel, *Les Faux Monnayeurs*, about a novelist writing a novel, including in it this novelist's journal. He then published the journal that he himself kept whilst writing that novel. Semantic closure is infinitely deferred.

This denial of narrative closure refuses notions of foundational meaning. It undermines Enlightenment faith in the ability of human rationality to discover a universally valid truth. Modernism fragments the Classical orders of reason and logical thought. It breaks free of the manacles of mutually exclusive dualisms, refusing to be contained by the inventorial mind. In Lawrence's *Women in Love*, for example, Ursula sees Birkin as a "clear stroke of uttermost contradiction."[18] "My thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them for too long in any one direction", writes Wittgenstein.[19] The mind is liberated from the logical sequences of chronology. Du Perron's *Country of Origin* points out the untruth of all such order. In Modernist literature time is rendered according to the rhythms of the imagination, the non-rational, associative patterns of the unconscious mind.

The Realist notion of clearly defined identity is decreated. With Modernism came the dehumanisation of art, the progressive elimination of Romantic and Naturalistic subjectivity, the fragmentation of the integral self. Characters become, as Strindberg says in his preface to *Miss Julia*, "conglomerates made up of past and present stages of civilisation, scraps of humanity, torn off pieces of Sunday clothing turned into rags - all patched together as is the human soul".[20] Eliot's Prufrock, writes Maud Ellmann, is

"a moving fragmentation: a bald spot, a morning coat, a simple pin, some arms and legs, all casually thrown together".[21] In *Heart of Darkness* a strange harlequin figure emerges from the forest of which Conrad writes: "his very existence was improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering. He was an insoluble problem".[22] This "harlequin figure", explains Allon White, gives "emblematic form to the essential and constitutive obscurity of personality, of the self as divided, enigmatic, presenting itself to the world in the form of a question or riddle".[23]

Parallel to this recognition of the enigma of the human mind comes a characteristically Modernist exploration of unconscious thought, pioneered by the work of Freud, Kierkegaard and Jung. From the self-possessed awareness of Enlightenment rationality the artist slips into the irrational, associative freedom of a collective unconscious with its own roving "logic" of dream and memory. Art comes to explore the id, that dark, inaccessable part of the human personality where, Freud writes, "no laws of thought are valid, and certainly not the laws of opposites". In the id "contradictory stimuli exist alongside each other without cancelling each other out or even detracting from one another. At most they unite in compromise forms...for the release of energy".[24]

Reflecting this breakdown of logic and reason comes a Modernist disruption of conventional syntax, a fragmentation of classical grammatical order. "I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar",[25] wrote Nietzsche in 1898. Whilst man still supposed the structures of language (with its subjects and objects, its past, present, and future tenses, its full stops at the ends of sentences), to correspond to those of the world, he was still not free of transcendental meanings. With the Modernist movement the logical structures of syntax are destroyed. "What is common to all modern poetry", writes Davie, "is the assertion or the assumption...that syntax in poetry is wholly different from syntax as understood by logicians and grammarians...never before the modern period has it been taken for granted that all poetic syntax is necessarily of this

sort".[26] "Classical writing...disintegrated", declares Barthes, "and the whole of Literature, from Flaubert to the present day, became the problematics of language".[27] Creative fusions overthrow neat categories of thought and logical orders of syntax, inaugurating the power of connotation and association, ellipsis and parataxis. "What can't be coded can be decoded if an ear aye sieze what no eye grieved for",[28] writes Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake*.

Modernist movements, as they subvert the foundationalism of orthodox thought, would seem to be primarily characterised by processes of disintegration and destruction. They would seem, initially, to concern themselves with the fragmentation of absolutes, the disruption of reason and logic, the destruction of traditional notions of an integral self, and the breakdown of grammar and syntax which reflects all this. Indeed, in 1935 Stephen Spender published a book, *The Destructive Element*, in which he was concerned to discuss the way in which Modernist artists confronted the chaos and confusion of a radically fragmented world.

However, it is at this point in my thesis that I would like to look a little more closely at this summary of Modernism in order to pick out from amongst its plethora of movements one broad, yet distinctive strand of development which evolves into what I shall term the "high" or "classical" Modernism of Eliot, Auden, or Yeats.

In 1953 Spender followed his first book with a second, *The Creative Element*, in which he argued that the solitary writer, by accepting the destructive element in which he was immersed, could then create out of his solitude an answer. If, therefore, I have initially suggested that the emphasis of Modernism lies in the breaking up of absolutes, systems, and types, in the confrontation of chaos, I would, nevertheless, now proceed to argue that certain Modernist movements progress beyond this destruction towards processes of fusion and merging. It is these which I shall characterise as "high" or "classical" Modernist movements. Their modes of thought do not so much reduce creation to nothingness as replace the

finality of the created with endless possibility. Though recognising that fiction can offer no simple description of a fixed and accepted world, the "high" Modernist text nonetheless ebbs and flows in an ever shifting tide of relativistic meanings. Creative fusions give rise to an endless flux and reflux of new juxtapositions and new wholes. "The ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary", writes Eliot. "The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of the cooking; [but] in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes".[29] Indeed, Eliot's paradoxical phrase in *The Waste Land*: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins",[30] typifies that endlessly fluid process of simultaneous decreation and recreation central to "classical" Modernism.

In her book, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Marjorie Perloff takes a passage from Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a central "high" Modernist text, and shows that although the poem is fragmented and broken, there still remains some notion of a whole, some totality to which these fragments belong. The extract Perloff chooses is taken from "The Fire Sermon":

> Unreal city
> Under the brown fog of a winter noon
> Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant
> Unshaven with a pocket full of currants
> C.i.f. London: documents at sight,
> Asked me in demotic French
> To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel
> Followed by a weekend at the Metropole.[31]

Perloff points out a coherent pattern of underlying meaning, a consistent referential scheme to which the symbols and images of the text cohere.

> Mr. Eugenides the Smyrna merchant is a figure of multiple symbolic associations. He has already been introduced in "The Burial of the Dead" as "the one-eyed merchant" of Madame Sosostris's Tarot pack; he reappears, moreover, in

> "Death by Water" as Phlebas the Phoenecian. In ancient times, Phoenecian and Syrian merchants were among those who spread the mystery cults throughout the Roman Empire; these mystery cults were, as Jessie Weston tells us, later associated with the Holy Grail. The sacred mystery of which Mr. Eugenides is the bearer, however, is only the shrivelled grape in the form of "currants" and his proposition to the narrator is thus a travesty of the Fisher King's invitation to the quester outside the Grail Castle. As the one-eyed man of the Tarot card, the merchant also symbolises death or winter: the private monster whom the primitive hero fights in his lair.
>
> Eliot's symbolism is always complex, and we can associate Mr. Eugenides not only with the debasement of the ancient mystery cults - and hence of religion in general - but also with the de-racination of the twentieth century city dweller. Like Hakagawa and Madame de Tornquist in the earlier "Gerontion", the Smyrna merchant is a sinister cosmopolite: he speaks "demotic" French rather than his native language and operates out of London. His name, moreover, is a play on "Eugenics", a science Eliot found especially distasteful. The one-eyedness of the merchant on the Tarot card also symbolises blindness, and most of the inhabitants of the Waste Land are, of course, blind in one form or another. In this context, the invitation to luncheon can be read as a debased food ritual of the sort we find throughout Eliot's poetry, beginning with Prufrock's "taking of toast and tea", and the Black Mass of "Gerontion", in which Christ the Tiger is "eaten...divided...drunk / Among whispers". The invitation is, moreover, made against the background of "the brown fog of a winter noon", with its connotations of decay and the death of the spirit.[32]

Despite its fragmented form, its radical dislocations of temporal and spatial continuity, *The Waste Land* has a perfectly coherent symbolic structure. Indeed, as Perloff says: "the symbolic threads are woven and designed so intricately that the whole becomes a reverberating echo chamber of meanings".[33] McFarlane recalls the derivation of the word "symbol" from *symballein*, to throw together. The defining thing in the Modernist mode, he writes, "is not so much that things fall *apart* but that they fall *together*...the centre is seen exerting not a centrifugal but a centripetal force; and the consequence is not disintegration but (as it were)

superintegration".[34]

In this sense of "superintegration", of underlying organic unity, the writing that has come to be seen as classically Modern (as opposed to Postmodern) in its orientation, the work of "high" Modernists such as Eliot, Auden or Yeats, may be considered to be rooted in a Symbolist tradition stemming from the poetic of Baudelaire and even from the Romantics before him. Baudelaire, whilst recognising the alogicality and indefiniteness of experience, nevertheless believed that through the use of integrating symbol a work of art could somehow embody a metaphysical content not otherwise expressible. In a similar way, works belonging to the "high" Modernist strand of twentieth century art, whilst acknowledging reality to be discontinuous and ambivalent, gesture nonetheless, through the fundamental coherence of their symbolic structures, towards some sense of underlying meaning. They refuse, as Eagleton says, "to abandon the struggle for meaning".[35]

It is here that the distinction between the two basic strands of Modernism arises: between the poetic of a "high" Modernist strand and that of an "other" strand, which for convenience I shall now term "Postmodernist", in so far as it was to give rise to what is now recognised to be a Postmodern aesthetic. Where "high" Modernism holds out for the possibility of meaning, if not for **a** meaning, the poetic of the "Postmodernist" strand of twentieth century literature (as this introduction will go on to show) holds out no hope for any meaning at all.

The principal differences between these two major strands of Modernist development may be illuminated by an exploration of the traditions from which they stem. The established "high" Modernist poetic, as has already been suggested, is rooted in a Symbolist tradition stemming from Baudelaire. A poetry of multiple relational meanings, the link between the word and its referents, the signifier and the signified, remains essentially intact. In contrast, the poetic of the "Postmodernist" strand stems from a tradition rooted in the anti-Symbolist practices of Rimbaud. "In the reaction

of Rimbaud to Baudelaire lies the germ of half the subsequent history of French poetry", writes Charles Tomlinson.[36] Rimbaud's poetry is characterised by what Todorov terms, a profound "undecidability".[37] Its imagery refuses to cohere into a consistent referential scheme. Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, Todorov explains, have "established discontinuity as their fundamental rule".[38] There is "a big difference between reference to indeterminacy and the creation of indeterminate forms",[39] writes Perloff in her investigation of this anti-Symbolist poetic. In the poetry of Rimbaud and his heirs the fundamental relationship between word and referent, between signifier and signified, is undermined.

The "Postmodernist" strand of literature, rooted in an aesthetic tradition of "undecidability", follows a course of development set along an axis of anti-Symbolist thought. It evolves through such movements as Dada and Imagism. "DADA DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING"[40] explains Tristan Tzara. It works to counteract interpretation. "How can anyone hope to order the chaos that constitutes that infinite, formless variation: man?"[41] Similarly, in the Imagist manifesto, Pound cries out for the abandonment of Symbolist ideas, advocating instead "direct treatment of the 'thing', whether subjective or objective".[42] It is this anti-Symbolist strain, this poetic of "undecidability", which develops on, unfolding in the work of French Poststructuralist theorists such as Derrida and Kristeva, until it evolves into what has now been recognised as the distinctively Postmodern poetic of American writers such as William Carlos Williams or Louis Zukofsky.

Broadly speaking, therefore, that movement which eventually came to be called Postmodernism, may be viewed as a development arising in reaction to an institutionalised "high" Modernism; to the writers who even by 1927, Graves and Riding tell us, had become "classics over the heads of the plain reader";[43] to the poetic of Eliot, who by 1950 had become, Leavis writes, "a public institution, a part of the establishment".[44] However, it must be stressed once more that the relationship between "high" Modernist

modes of thought and Postmodernist ones, is complex. There is neither a radical break between the two, nor a simple evolution from one to the other. The Postmodern aesthetic arises as a critique rather than a cancellation of classical Modernism. It inquires beyond, or around, or underneath those matters which classically Modernist movements first broached. Postmodernism is a continuation, but modification, of cultural Modernism. It explores afresh issues and possibilities opened up by some of the early Modernist movements.

Postmodernism cannot be neatly periodised. Indeed, to use the term as a label for a cultural epoch would be a contradiction of the very premises of a thought which refuses such totalities. Nonetheless, Brooker writes that the designations "Postmodern" and "Postmodernism" surfaced "briefly in the forties and fifties and were then employed, still earlier than is usually supposed, in the next decade as organising terms in critical essays registering changes in cultural values".[45]

Postmodernism is impossible to succinctly define. As an article, "Postmodern Postpoetry", explains:

> a crisis of legitimacy and representation has thrown everything in the air. And, not surprisingly, the term "postmodernism" itself has become airborne. Loosened from the fixed categories and hierarchies which held art and culture still, yet full of a lack of confidence in rational thought and consensus, it goes slaloming across the forms, media, and discourses it means to survey. It is difficult, consequently to pin down.[46]

Many broad and contrary directions have been ascribed to Postmodernism. Its moods are complex and variously focussed. Its diverse perspectives do not add up to any totalising theory. Postmodernism is, Patricia Waugh suggests, more "a structure of feeling",[47] an attitude, or mood, than a definable movement.

However, the common source of all the diverse foci of Postmodernist thought is that marked sense that traditional forms of knowledge and

representation are undergoing a fundamental shift. The way in which Modernist movements reacted against established foundationalist philosophies has already been discussed. Nonetheless, that strand of twentieth century art which developed into a "high" or "classical" Modernism has, as I have shown, still retained some underlying notion of the absolute, some sense of metaphysical depth or foundational meaning. It has not, perhaps, amounted to quite such a radical overthrow of tradition as Herbert Read suggests (see p.1 above). Indeed, as Terry Eagleton writes in his article, "Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism":

> old-fashioned modernism...is still agonisingly caught up in metaphysical depth and wretchedness, still able to experience psychic fragmentation and social alienation as spiritually wounding, and so embarrassingly enmortgaged to the very bougeois humanism it otherwise seeks to subvert.[48]

In contrast, that "other" strand of development in twentieth century arts, the "Postmodernist" strand, abandons the struggle for wholeness and unity of being. By the time its modes of thought have evolved into what is now labelled a Postmodernist aesthetic, totality is absent. Postmodernism, Eagleton goes on to say, is "confidently post-metaphysical". It has "outlived all that fantasy of interiority, that pathological itch to scratch surfaces for concealed depths".[49] In his article, "The Culture of Postmodernism", Hassan opposes an Enlightenment heritage in the name of "a brave new world free from the tyranny of wholes".[50] In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard famously declares the collapse of grand narratives and metanarratives. Concepts such as nation, state, or essential human nature, have been eroded by economic changes propelling man into a new age of information, technology, consumerism, and global economics. The individual, all sense even of a lost authenticity gone, all ability to interpret vanished, is cast adrift in the perpetual present of a superficial, centreless world, replete with ever-new, ever-recycled, images or representations. Attempts to resolve metaphysical dilemmas give way to an acceptance of

the impossibility of making any sense whatsoever of the world as a whole. In novels such as Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, or John Fowles' *The Magus*, meaning dissolves into a conceptual jungle. Texts refuse interpretation. As the narrator of Salman Rushdie's *Shame* puts it: "I myself manage to hold large numbers of irreconcilable views simultaneously, without the least difficulty. I do not think others are less versatile".[51]

Postmodernist modes of thought move away from Kantian philosophies and turn instead towards Nietzsche, adopting the aesthetic as an alternative to a priori reasoning. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche advocates the need for man to be self-consciously aware of his fictionalising powers in such a way that he will be wary against accepting another's "will to power" as the collectively validated truth of myth. He proposes that man should destroy the false myths which chain him to beliefs in subject-centred reason in order that the atoms of the world may be seen for what they are. Since there is no totality, Nietzsche argues, it is better self-consciously to construct one's own provisional fiction and aesthetically reshape the anarchy of the atoms, than to believe that a fragment can express any pre-existent whole. Nietzsche's ideas precurse those of many Postmodernist thinkers. Richard Rorty,[52] for instance, argues that philosophers should abandon the outworn rhetoric of metaphysical truth and turn instead to criticism for, he suggests, it is only thus that man can embrace the potential currently offered to him to reshape existence through aesthetic activity.

With this Postmodernist shift away from foundational positions and meanings there comes a profound sense not just of epistemological uncertainty, but of ontological uncertainty too. It is not just ways of knowing the world that are questioned, but ways of being and acting in the world. In Ionesco's *Victims of Duty*, the detective, like Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, is certain in the beginning that "everything hangs together, everything can be comprehended in time". He keeps "moving forward...one step at a time", tracking down the extraordinary: "Mallot

with a 't' at the end, or Mallod with a 'd' ". However, whereas in the world of the Victorian novel, the world of rational causality, the sleuth eventually catches up with his man, in Ionesco's play the detective cannot make Choubert "catch hold of" the elusive Mallot. Despite his brutal efforts to "plug the gaps"[53] of a wayward memory by stuffing food down his throat, what he finds is only the bottomless hole of Choubert's being, what he finds is nothing. The play, instead of ending with a retrospective that clarifies the mystery, comes to a close in verbal, formal, and analagously, ontological disintegration.

This recognition of ontological uncertainty is prefigured in the movement of the Postmodernist poetic away from traditional philosophies of consciousness and towards a Heideggerean mode of thought. Heidegger refuses the Cartesian model of subject-centred reason, of the radical split between subject and object by which the self, as the hub of reality, relates to the world outside it in an exploratory, necessarily exploitative way. Rather, man experiences a sense of situatedness in the world, a world which pre-exists him and cannot be consciously manipulated or defined, but through which he comes into being as it "worlds" through him. Man comes to be what he is in the world through the textures of understanding which it provides. Transcendence is replaced by a notion of immanence, of the capacity of the mind to generalise itself in the world and merge more and more with its own environment. The aesthetic comes to provide an alternative to logic or subject-centred reason for it allows a radically ontogenetic "showing forth" which refuses a sense of separation between man and world. In her essay, "Against Interpretation", Susan Sontag writes that "transparence", the experiencing of "the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are", is "the highest, most liberating value in art - and in criticism - today".[54] The function of criticism, she goes on to explain, should be to show "*how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*".[55]

An aesthetic apprehension of the world replaces the old depth-surface

model of textual interpretation in which a latent core structure was believed to be causally related to an apparently contingent surface. Postmodernist arts refuse interpretation. As Sontag writes: "interpretation is largely reactionary, stifling...to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world".[56] She goes on to speak of a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability. It is against this that Postmodernist movements in art react. Abstract painting has no content and therefore it cannot be interpreted. Pop art works towards the same result, though by opposite means. It uses a content so blatant that "what it is" ends up by being uninterpretable. In literature, Alain Robbe Grillet's immensely detailed, scientifically exact, and metaphor free, descriptions of objects, prevent the reader from visualising them. By presenting the reader with more data than he can synthesise, the discourse affirms the resistance of the world to interpretation.

The meaning of a work of art becomes radically indeterminate. Todorov's "undecidability" is endemic to Postmodernism. Not only is truth abandoned, but also the desire to maintain the truth effect. Dissensus replaces the idea of consensus. In Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, the religion of Bokonism is based upon an impossible paradox. "The first sentence in *The Books of Bokonan* is this", the narrator tells us, " 'All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies'".[57] Beckett's *Molloy* similarly refuses explication. No amount of study could ever establish the identity of the man with the heavy coat and stick encountered by Moran. Truth becomes indistinguishable from fiction, or rather the binary opposition between the two is negated. In "The Babysitter", Coover tells not only the "truth" of what "really" happened but also the "fiction" of all that might possibly have happened. In Italo Calvino's *If On a Winter Night*, a plethora of worlds are embedded within the original diagesis: novels-within-the-novel, films-within-the-novel, still-photographs-within-the-novel. Each shift of narrative level involves a corresponding shift in ontological level in such a way that the original horizon is effectively lost.

It is an apt depiction of the pluralistic, relativistic, Postmodern world.

Deprived of semantic sense Postmodernism comes to be characterised in all its forms by loss of depth. As Baudrillard suggests in his essay, "Simulacra and Simulations", contemporary man lives in the depthless society of the image. In place of hermeneutics there is a shift away from signification and towards the exploration of experience as sensuous surface, towards what Sontag calls "an erotics of art".[58] In a superficial play of language the word is detached from its referent, signifier from signified. In the opening paragraph of Beckett's *Ping*, for example, words like "white", "bare" and "light", though repeated again and again, have no specific connotations. Their value is compositional rather than referential. Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*, says Jerome Klinkowitz, shows "how language can exist purely as itself with no reference at all to content".[59] Poets like Cage, Ashbery or O'Hara, shift the focus of language away from signification towards the free-play of signifiers.

Free of content, Postmodernist fiction reflects a culture which grows increasingly shapeless. The conjunctive closed forms of earlier art are replaced by disjunctive anti-form, purpose is replaced by play, design by chance, determinacy by indeterminancy. David Antin's talk poems have no form at all. They merely go on and on, doing away not only with metre, but also with lineation, that last stronghold of contemporary free verse. There is a total randomness in William Burrough's cut-ups or B. S. Johnson's loose leaf novel, shuffled by each reader into a different order. In a Postmodern world there seems to be a willingness to live with uncertainty, to tolerate random multiplicity, even to welcome it. John Cage's "Silence" is not just a portrayal, but a celebration of the quintessential non-sensicality of a Postmodernist world.

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From this summary it may be broadly concluded that a transition from

a "high" Modernist to a Postmodernist poetic would be marked by a shift away from an aesthetic which, despite recognition of an essentially fragmentated and discontinuous reality, maintains a fundamental symbolic coherence implying some metaphysical or deeper unity, and towards an aesthetic which refuses mimesis or consensus, its multiple perspectives refusing to coalesce or resolve into any transcendent or more profound whole. It is this shift, I would argue, that the poetry of J.H. Prynne rehearses and explores. His work moves from the "high" Modernism of the first poem which I shall discuss, "Concerning Quality, Again", a poem which is nostalgic for the Platonic modes of foundational thought which have shaped Western philosophy, to the Postmodernism of his work, *Down Where Changed*, in which the completely written surface of the text eschews extrinsic reference entirely.

Before moving on to further discussion, however, I would like briefly to digress in order to place Prynne in the context of the British poetic tradition within which his writing appears.

All twentieth century art is not neccessarily Modernist in orientation. An anti-Modernist, Realist tradition has persisted throughout the twentieth century, running alongside Modernist movements. John Betjeman, for example, often considered the last great Victorian, was writing best-selling poetry in a Realist vein right up until his death in 1984. Indeed, throughout twentieth century British writing, Modernist and anti-Modernist traditions may be seen to have gone through fluctuating phases of dominance.

Although the opening of the century found London astir with Modernist activity, Wyndham Lewis writes that with the outbreak of the First World War, "down came the lid - the day was lost, for art, at Sarajevo".[60] Experimental poetry gave way to the easy sentiment of the Georgian lyric whose traditional English themes were particularly appropriate to war-time patriotism.

It was only with the establishment of peace that the Modernist poetic resumed its dominance. The years immediately after the war saw the

publication of Yeats' *The Wild Swans at Coole*, Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley", and Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Yet still the progress and development of the Modernist aesthetic was not to be straightforward in Britain.

By the end of the nineteen-twenties social optimism subsided. Economic depression followed the Wall Street collapse. A mood of political unrest witnessed the rising of totalitarian governments and a Europe rearmed. Writers of the thirties criticised Modernist thought for its obscurity and elitism. They called for a more politically aware, openly communicative, form of writing. In his pamphlet, *The New Realism*, Spender demanded the re-establishment of a common ground of understanding between the artist and his audience, a fertile communication to supersede the sterile experimentalism of Modernist poetics. Socially conscious left-wing writers such as Orwell, Auden, Isherwood or Spender, became mainstream.

Then, with the end of the Second-World-War a counter tradition grew up again. Poetry swung once more towards a Modernist pole. People were disillusioned with Marxist promises. In the writings of Charles Morgan and Dylan Thomas, for example, concern for linguistic freedom and individual sensibility greatly diluted interest in propaganda.

However, this renewed exploration of Modernist modes lead gradually to a form of writing in which experimentalism came to seem over familiar. Critics began to detect a weakness and looseness of style. A leader in the *Spectator* talked of the "lush, loose, fashionable writing of the Forties".[61] Spender describes the "drawing-room madness" of Surrealism, and the "army of amateurs who think that to be illogical is to be poetical".[62] Yvor Winters refers to the "young and decadent romantics...convinced that they are in the tradition of Donne...[because] though they cannot be profound, it is always fairly easy to be difficult".[63]

As Alvarez depicts it, experimentation was indulged in for its own sake and the twentieth century raced from one style to another so quickly that

there seemed "no longer any real styles at all". Instead only "fashions, idiosyncracies, group mannerisms and obsessions".[64] Movements developed in feedback, defining themselves in opposition to their predecessors, so that what appeared as innovative was often merely a modified reversion to the latest fashion but one.

British poetry became weak and interbred, retreating into insularity. Alienated from certain American developments which, looking to the French Poststructuralists for their theory, were developing an anti-Symbolist strain of Modernism, the British poetic was dominated instead by its Symbolist inheritance, by a mode of writing more or less directly descended from the English Romantic tradition, though by now greatly attenuated. Yeats himself, says Fraser, came not from the "noble sobriety" of Wordsworth, but out of Romanticism's "decadent development, out of Pater and the pre-Raphaelites". And in so far as the Yeatsian poetic does stem from a centrally Romantic aesthetic, Fraser goes on to say, it was rooted in the "mythomania" of Blake and Shelley, the "conscious stylishness" of Landor.[65] Davie traces a progressive lack of confidence in poetic "taste and judgement" leading ultimately to "hysterical arrogance".[66]

It was against this background that the Movement writers emerged. A tenuous, short-lived, incohesive group, which never really acknowledged its group identity. They were united, says Conquest, by little more than a "negative determination to avoid bad principles".[67] In many ways they could be considered to have formed nothing more than a localised reaction to their immediate environment. Another of the "negative feedbacks" which, Alvarez tells us, have formed contemporary British poetry. A reaction against the "wild loose emotion...[of] the drum rolling forties", against banner-waving Marxists of the thirties, against "diffuse and sentimental verbiage...[and] hollow technical pirouettes".[68] Yet the Movement established a stylistic identity which transcended both the group and the decade and came to stand for certain characteristics in English writing which still exert an influence today.

Without a firm area of common belief or agreement a style soon passes for it does little more than satisfy a temporary need. At a time when Davie considered modern styles to have become stuffed parodies, "gusts and grunts, hiccups and heehaws...unencumbered by trivial or portentous association",[69] the Movement provided a clean break. Profoundly opposed to the whims and vagaries of fashion, Movement writers looked back to the classical precepts of the Enlightenment. Davie, writes G.S. Fraser, "aims at the restricted gloom of Cowper, the moral weight of Johnson, and affable flow...of Goldsmith".[70]

This retrenchment stands, says a *Spectator* article of 1954, as the very antithesis of Modernism: "anti-phoney...anti-wet, sceptical, robust, ironic, [and] prepared to be as comfortable as possible".[71] Invoking the traditional characteristics of English writing: rationalism, realism, and empiricism, the Movement's foundations were dug deep in British culture, and for this reason it came to have a profound influence on evolving British literature.

"Restorations are not repetitions",[72] writes Conquest in his introduction to *New Lines*. Though Movement writers were deeply influenced by Augustan tradition, they were not concerned simply to imitate it. Rather, they used its precepts to purify and refresh contemporary English writing. Modernist modes of art were degenerating into a meaningless tangle of inter-knotted strands. The Movement poets dropped the cats cradle. "I believe that every poem must be its own freshly created universe", writes Larkin. "I have no belief in 'tradition', or a common myth kitty, or casual allusion to other poems or poets".[73] Modernist intertextuality was abandoned. The Movement poets sought a new, Realist, freshness of vision, free, says Wain, of "the blended refuse that other minds have dropped behind".[74]

A Hardyesque tradition of Humanism was introduced back into British poetry. "Now one [can] simply relax back into one's own life and write about it",[75] says Larkin. A sense of stable subjectivity returned, and with it traditional concepts of authorial intention. Realist meaning and belief in a

world accepted as unchallengeably given and finite, were re-established. As Elizabeth Jennings writes in "Music and Words": "Thoughts still are shaped of hard / Unalterable stuff".[76] Literature aimed once more for the fixity of denotation rather than the fluidity of connotation. In place of Modernist ambiguity, irrationality, and achronological synthesis, came the clarity and plainess of systematic, Augustan thought. Davie's poem, "The Fountain", serves almost as a syllogistic argument, and though it may be interpreted on various levels, one of them is of literal description.

Language, too, became rational and comprehensible, even where the verse was most emotional or sensuous. In "Cherry Ripe", Davie talks of "feelings that are mastered by / Maturing rythms to compose a whole".[77] The emphasis of writing shifted once more from expression to communication. Poetry, says Larkin, "is born of the tension between what [the poet] non-verbally feels, and what can be got over in common word-usage to someone who hasn't had his experience, or education, or travel grant".[78] The loose, organic forms of Modernist texts were replaced by a more traditional sense of form as a controlled construction. Poetry aimed to mirror the logical processes which lay behind it so that its impact might reflect its content. Poetic rhythm was employed only in so far as it imaged a concrete sense. Indeed, as Conquest wrote in his poem "Humanities", "verse can warm the mirrors of the word".[79]

Although the work of poets such as Davie and Gunn soon developed away from the initial rigidity of the Movement aesthetic, a fundamental ethos of rationality and a basic view that literature communicated a reality existing prior to, and independently of the act of communication, remained as a substratum to evolving traditions of British verse. It was this anti-Modernist aesthetic which came to hinder the development of Modernist modes of thought in contemporary English poetry. A school of significant critics had grown up around the Movement writers. In 1947 Winters published, *In Defence of Reason*. Art, which had become entangled in its own reflexivity, was subjected to rational scrutiny. Analytical critics like

Leavis condemned preciosity, obscurity and the self-indulgence of the neo-Romantics. Furthermore, the Movement, though concerned to address the common reader, had at the same time been directed to a much smaller audience of able and discriminating readers. Poems such as Davie's "The Fountain", Larkin's "I Remember, I Remember", or Amis' "Against Romanticism", display an academicism and intellectual wit particularly esteemed by the literary intelligentsia. Soon, said Amis, "all the people writing [poetry] were dons, and all the people who were reviewing it were dons, and all the people who were reading it were dons".[80] A new literary intelligensia emerged, agreeing on broad cultural and social issues, and it was they who came to control the publishing houses, to control the arts, the media, and the University Chairs. Sympathetic to the aesthetic and ideological values of a Movement line of poetry, they blocked the more general development of non-canonical innovative work.

Even in the vibrant atmosphere of sixties Britain, with its expanding networks of television and film, and opportunities of education for all, the arts maintained a basic referentiality. The emphasis was on communication. The coterie which grew up around Ian Hamilton and *The Review*, for example, encouraged fresh forms of Poundian Imagism, yet it maintained, nonetheless, that the Imagist fusion should be one of relationship. The poems were primarily social poems. The Group, too, which published its *A Group Anthology* in 1963, and *A Theory of Communication* in 1970, was more concerned with social meaning than stylistic innovation. As Edward Lucie Smith writes in his introduction to *A Group Anthology*: "the only principle to which we would all suscribe is that poetry is discussable...open to rational examination".[81] Even the Liverpool poets, with their anti-establishment ethos, took their cue from Rimbaud's life rather than from his radically innovative art. They too were principally concerned with communication.

Although there were, of course, exceptional British poets exploring experimental forms of writing (poets such as Ted Hughes or Basil Bunting),

the British poetic tradition had largely become alienated from concurrent American developments in which an anti-Symbolist strain of Modernism was evolving into the Postmodernist poetic of writers such as Olson, O'Hara, or Ashbery. The British had retreated into insularity. Established magazines like *Agenda* or *New Review* refused to tolerate "lower case jamborees...[or] Olsonite anything", writes Blake Morrison in *The Times Literary Supplement*.[82] When Eric Mottram took over as editor of *Poetry Review* in 1971 he intended to change it into an outlet for international avante garde, but significantly he was out by 1977. Mainstream Britain subscribed to a fundamentally anti-experimentalist ethos, and it was only alternative magazines such as *Curtains* or *Poetry Information* which could claim to have more in common with international developments, with American publications such as *Montemora* or *Telephone*.

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The work of J. H. Prynne reacts against a traditionalist poetic. Publishing through small presses such as Ferry, Pampisford, and Cape Goliard, his early books of verse, *Kitchen Poems*, *Daylight Songs*, and *Aristeas*, became available for the first time in 1968. These were to introduce Prynne as a poet who would play a crucial role in the re-introduction of imaginatively innovative work back into the British poetic tradition.

There has been comparatively little critical appraisal of Prynne's work. What there is amounts to little more than a few brief appearances in wider surveys of British poetry and a small number of articles, published often in the more marginal magazines and reviews. Perhaps the best general introduction to Prynne is that summarised account of his work which appears in *Contemporary Poets*.[83] Here Nigel Wheale draws attention to the intellectual complexity and the formal beauty of the poetry; he briefly discusses the interpretative role of the reader, and the place of Prynne's

thought in the context of contemporary writing and debate. However, the reader approaching Prynne for the first time may feel the need for a slightly more extended account. Therefore, I think that at this point in my thesis a brief survey of some of the other published criticisms of Prynne would be illuminating in so far as they map out a few of the lines of approach which have been taken towards Prynne's singular and demanding work. It must be stressed, however, that although these critical pieces have certain ideas and areas of enquiry in common, they do not lend themselves to arrangement into any coherent sequence or argument. They remain at best a series of disparate, though often penetrating, thoughts and discussions.

What all critical commentary seems to acknowledge is the complexity of Prynne's work. That his poetry is "'difficult' must not be denied", writes Alan Hals ey.[84] It "is to a high degree intellectually complex, and...has consistently made minimum concessions to the reader's conventional expectations",[85] explains Nigel Wheale. Reeve and Kerridge write of the "puzzling surface", the "forbiddingly dense paragraphs" and the "wrenching shifts of idiom" characterising a poetry which often "assume[s] our possession of knowledge and terminology we do not have".[86] "I suppose I understand his poetry rather fitfully,"[87] admits Douglas Oliver, whilst David Trotter declares that Prynne "expropriat[es] with complete ruthlessness [the reader's] assumptions about the ways in which poems 'mean'".[88]

A few critics, repelled by this difficulty, have dismissed Prynne's work. Acknowledging their own confusion and lack of understanding they appear to have felt justified in inflexible attack. A letter published in *The English Intelligencer* in 1966, for example, sees one of Prynne's poems as "an incredible creation which takes over fifty lines to say round about nothing".[89] In 1971, Michael Long[90] looks at another work and declares that only one eighth of it is interpretable. Even in 1983, Ian Hughes describes the collected edition of Prynne's work as "over 300 pages of nearly

impenetrable poems"[91] He declares that the "ultimate poverty of [its author's] mistaken method lies in his deliberate failure to discover images adequate for the ideas for which he seeks to give poetic expression", and he goes on to disparage what he sees as the "tortuous and frequently tendentious passages of discursive and irritatingly spurious philosophising".[92] After an encounter with such criticisms as these, one might well understand why Donald Davie wrote in 1973 that Prynne was "not being listened to."[93] Indeed, one might still be inclined to think Davie right.

Prynne's work is not suited to those critical approaches that seek thematic interpretations which may be lead out into statements about scenes or events. Peter Porter complains that "Prynne is hermetic and priestly: he wants disciples not readers".[94] Perhaps Porter is right. It takes a degree of initial trust and a certain slavish tenacity, backed up by a breadth of imagination, to come to terms with Prynne at anything less than a superficial level. However, those critics who have troubled to devote time to his work have found themselves richly rewarded by their discovery of a unique new talent. "J.H. Prynne's poetry has...maintained an utterly singular development, paying no regard whatsoever to the recognised currency of contemporary English verse", writes Nigel Wheale.[95] His is "a body of writing that is not merely different from, but in important ways conceptually *larger* than the cultural consensus which up to now has regarded it with suspicion and alarm", says Geoffrey Ward.[96] A review in *The Times Literary Supplement* declares that Prynne "remains unique", that there "has never been a poetry quite like this". Whilst acknowledging that the "poems work at the limits of sense", it goes on to remind us that it was once said "that the more important poetry of the future is unlikely to be simple".[97]

Many readers may first encounter discussion of Prynne's work in Donald Davie's *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry,* published in 1973. Here Davie sets out to establish Hardy (rather than Eliot, Pound or Yeats), as the

most important influence on contemporary British poetry. Prynne is approached as a writer whose sensitivity to topography and locality is inherited, via Auden, from a Hardyesque poetic. Furthermore, Davie suggests that Prynne is the inheritor of Hardy's modest political aspirations and respectable working ethic. His emphasis, Davie writes, "is frequently on patience, on lowering of the sights, settling for limited objectives".[98]

A contrasting, but equally tangential view of Prynne is that expressed by Peter Ackroyd in *Notes For a New Culture*, published in 1976. Ackroyd appraises Prynne's poetry as a type of post-referential writing. He describes it as having a "completely written surface" which refuses "extrinsic reference entirely".[99]

Jim Philip[100] writing in 1977 declares Davie's account to be confusing in so far as it obscures the decisive influence of Olson on Prynne. He traces the thought of both these poets back to its source in modern physics and the discovery that matter is not static substance but fluent energy. It is through recourse to this idea, Philip suggests, that Prynne's poetry fights free of the habitual divisions of Western consciousness. However, as Philip struggles to discover how this insight might be brought to bear upon social structures and attitudes, it becomes evident that he commits himself to a limited view of Prynne as a poet principally concerned with introducing a fresh tone of social enquiry into a tradition which has withdrawn from this area.

Perhaps one of the first important approaches to Prynne is that made by Veronica Forrest-Thomson in her book *Poetic Artifice*, published posthumously in 1978. This work gains particular credibility, I think, in the light of Prynne's own remark that the things which he and Forrest-Thomson had in common were "poems and ways of producing and talking about them".[101]

Forrest-Thomson is concerned to study what she calls "poetic artifice", the rhythmic, poetic, verbal and logical devices which distinguish poetry from prose. Twentieth century poetry, she claims, is marked by a formal

experimentation which must be taken into account if one is to understand its condition and possibilities. She disparages those critical readings which are concerned to rationalise Prynne's poetry. Nor, she insists, should his work be looked at on a purely formal level. He is too serious for "fiddling about with pretty patterns".[102]

Rather, Forrest-Thomson approaches Prynne as a poet who is "tendentiously obscure".[103] His work is characterised by what she calls (quoting from one of Prynne's own texts), a "fierce vacancy".[104]

Prynne, she suggests, tries to look at a pre-mediated reality, a state of being which has not been appropriated by language and distorted to suit the requirements of society. His obscurity "is a cover for a deeper and more profound rationality which, while discontinous with the world of ordinary language, is continous with a world which is an imagined alternative".[105]

As her book nears its end she comes to the conclusion that Prynne's work, through resisting social comprehension and turning instead to a masterly use of poetic artifice, restores language to its primary beauty as a craft. It not only allows the reader an insight into the future possibilites of poetry, but also makes poetry once more "capable of powerful order and powerful thought".[106]

The importance of poetic form is recognised by Douglas Oliver in his article, "J.H Prynne's 'Of Movement Towards A Natural Place' ", published in 1979. However, Oliver also felt that more general discussions of Prynne's work were in danger of falling into abstraction. He is concerned to return to a consideration of the text and "the bald and obvious role of its meanings".[107] Risking the banality of simple paraphrasis, he selects a single poem and proceeds to tease out its meanings, waving aside peripheral references and allusions, axing discussion of any phrases too complex for brief explanation, and insisting that his lack of knowledge does not block either his basic understanding or his encounter with the work's "steely prosody".[108]

Oliver reads the poem as part of a continuing effort by its author to

deepen man's understanding of the relationship between mental and physical processes. However, he explains, Prynne goes beyond commonplace explorations of this idea. He looks for the actual birth processes of mind (as they are reflected in those areas where modern science has sought the birth processes of nature), and thereby seeks that notional moment in which language opens out to immense possibilities.

In exploring this theme of emergent language, Oliver argues, Prynne reaches towards a poetic formulation which goes beyond the linguistic structures of traditional ontological philosophies. He extends his thought towards that notional moment preceding the actual transformation of an event into cognition, when the possibility of true, real action lies in potential. This moment, Oliver concludes, is one of unification: "like a horizon rim...that both trembles with night and shines with day. As the tight music of these stanzas trembles and shines....".[109] Oliver's conclusion emphasises the interrelationship between subject matter and form. It is significant that it is these final words which are quoted on the cover of the collected edition of Prynne's work.

In his discussion of *The White Stones*, Nigel Wheale also recognises the important connection between the semantic and formal levels of Prynne's poetry. "Unless the necessity of the poetic movements can be clearly demonstrated in the formal qualities of the writing, unless the activity of the language is recognised to be its primary poesis, any account of the poetry remains external, a muffled paraphrase of its gestures".[110]

Wheale explores how Prynne's work takes on board kinds of knowledge that have been thought to require extensive and systematic exposition rather than intense and local lyricism on the part of their particular poetic language. Prynne's writing entertains geological, economic, and ethical sets of description within poetic structures which never close themselves about a presumptive belief in any of these disciplines. His language thus escapes the kinds of substantive knowledge which which it temporarily consorts.

In this article, Wheale touches upon the vital role played by the reader of Prynne's poetry. As he summarises it later in *Contemporary Poets*: "Prynne's poetry requires its reader continuously to consider how any meaning is derived at any point during the process of interpretation, and further, that whatever meaning is temporarily entertained, be then subject to rigorous question. To read Prynne is to undergo an education".[111]

This role of the reader is also recognised by David Trotter in his: "A Reading of Prynne's *Brass*", published in *PN Review* in 1978. Although Trotter's declared aim is to approach the language of *Brass* as a process of communication, an analysis of extracts from "The Bee Target on His Shoulder" illustrates the way in which the poem develops "an implacable and fiercely presumptious indeterminacy".[112] Revoking any promises of tutelage it breeds deliberate confusion in the reader by persistently denying the possibility of any stable unit of meaning. There is, Trotter says, an absence of any framework which might convey to the reader where the poem speaks from. The basis of mutual understanding is undermined. The reader enters into a "brutal clash of solipsisms".[113]

Yet, Trotter argues, this very helplessness to which the reader is reduced may be creative. Removed from the protective fixity of his present self the reader may find himself with no alternative but to risk himself in thought. He must commit himself to a constant re-reading and re-examination of his doubts sown by the internal dissensions of the poem. "Since he is never furnished with proof or exhortation, he must make his own meaning".[114] Prynne's poetry, Trotter suggests, enforces a self-estrangement from which liberating thought might spring.

Later, in *The Making of the Reader*, Trotter enlarges upon this idea. Looking again at Prynnne's *Brass*, he declares that the poetry turns "a Medusa-head" on any reader who demands delivery of a simple meaning. A poem's thesis is "produced by the play between different forms of explanation, each of which articulates its own grouping of interests and values".[115] The meaning is the work done by the reader's mind as it adjusts

researchers".[122] Prynne's insistence upon a breadth of imaginative and political reference, says Jarvis, gives notice that the inherent difficulty of the poetry is not to be taken merely as an epistemological one. Rather "the breadth of vocabulary draws attention to, and asks the reader to resist, the division of intellectual labour by which powerful practices of knowledge are made to serve sectional interests".[123] The first poem in the collected edition of Prynne's works opens: "The whole thing it is, the difficult / matter".[124] Jarvis argues that the "matter" which is to be engaged with is "difficult" because, although this "matter" is conceived of as "the whole thing", the languages and knowledges available to us are cognitively and politically partial.

Jarvis explores the poem "Aristeas", showing how Prynne's text resists those lines of enquiry which have restricted their thought by boundaries. In his effort to do justice to the "quality" of things, Prynne turns away from the prescriptions of closed systems of thought and looks instead at the particularity, the individuality of linguistic, conceptual, and bodily experience. In "Aristeas" Prynne does not simply take up with the view of one particular culture, with an Asian nomadic culture as opposed to a Greek trading economy, but takes up dialectically with the irreducible differences between them. He does not provide an answer, Jarvis says, but a question "by which the incommensurably qualitative comes to measure what it has been measured...by".[125]

Prynne, Jarvis would seem to suggest, does not work within any single closed political framework. It is this idea that is most clearly taken up in the recently published discussion of contemporary British poetries: *The Scope of the Possible*. Here Peter Middleton describes Prynne's *The White Stones* as "one of the most complex engagements with the political and philosophical difficulties of producing a political poetry in Britain".[126] Prynne, he says, constantly questions and makes explicit resistance to the current state of social order and its internal dynamics of change.

Middleton reads *The White Stones* as a political text aiming at just such

a grand synthesis of linguistics, ethics, science, and history as is necessary to give rise to emancipatory social change. It is little wonder, he says, that his work is not acceptable to the establishment, to the "little-Englandism" fostered in the fifties by a Movement poetic.

In the light of Middleton's argument, one might well understand why Prynne's work has received so comparatively little critical appraisal. Despite the evidently serious and challenging nature of his texts, his resistance to establishment principles has meant that he has been passed over by mainstream currents of enquiry.

Prynne has himself written a small body of literary criticism and a few of his lectures and letters have been published as well, although these again have appeared in lesser known, indeed often obscure, pamphlets and reviews. His prose tends to manifest the same "sharp beauty" and "austere delight", the same "cool aesthetic" and "formal perfection", which Wheale[127] recognises to be characteristic of his poetry. For this reason alone it is a pleasure to read. Furthermore, much of what is said in these prose pieces is of relevance to Prynne's own poetry. Not only may his own attitudes and approaches towards the work of others be considered a useful guide into ways of looking at his own texts, but some of his prose pieces, "A Letter to Andrew Duncan"[128] for instance, amount to statements of his own poetic. Indeed, an appraisal of Prynne's prose alone would demand an extended piece of writing.

However, Prynne's prose is not directly apposite to those particular aspects of his work which I intend to discuss in this thesis. I therefore do not mean to look at it in any depth, but merely to give a brief chronological list of a number of his published pieces, touching only in the most cursory fashion upon a few of the more salient ways in which these pieces might bear relevance to possible critical approaches to his poetic work.

In 1964 Prynne's review of Douglas Woolf's novel, *Fade Out*, pays particular attention not only to subject matter but also to style. Prynne not

only looks at the themes of the work, the way, for instance, in which "the rhythms of living may expand into a more fluent measure",[129] a theme explored in his own poetry; but also takes a detailed look at the text, quoting from it extensively in a manner suggestive of that approach which so many critics were to take to his own work. Furthermore, Prynne observes in Woolf's writing that very wryness and irony, that "very level tone of voice"[130] which are found in his own poetry.

Prynne's letters published in *The English Intelligencer* bear an often more obvious, although not necessarily more important, relevance to his poetry. For instance, his "A Communication", states that the poem, "The Wound, Day and Night", is "a consequence in some sense at least of the Royal Society Symposium on *Continental Drift*. And more especially, "Miller's paper on Geochronology."[131] Whether this is immediately helpful to the critic grappling with the complexities of the text is debatable, but if nothing else it reveals Prynne's typical erudition, that scholarship which grounds all his thought, in this case his developing exploration of geomorphology and its relationship to human life.

The pages of *The English Intelligencer* are scattered with prose pieces which sometimes illuminate, though only in brief flashes, his own poetic practices. In his letter to Andrew Crozier for instance, written on 13th September, 1966, Prynne says that "if a set of language is to need and deserve confidence it must keep its own kind of fidelity: it must be true to its purpose".[132] This amounts to a direct expression of Prynne's own poetic. Similarly, in a letter to Peter Riley of 14th February, 1967, Prynne outrightly declares his aim: "I address myself to the primal history of *quality* as a designation for accumulations of motive simultaneous with patterns of behaviour as convergence. I could take this as a place focus, but just as well in the discretionary image of person, or local convulsions in the sequence of time".[133]

In 1968 Prynne wrote a review of Chris Torrance's *Green Orange Purple*, published in *Grosseteste Review*. The piece opens: "The singing

voice of such persuasive and dilated movement has not been heard for a long time in the land".[134] This sentence, apart from being itself lyrical in tone, could almost be used to describe Prynne's own poetry. Indeed, throughout the review, Prynne's observations on Torrance's poetry bear relevance to his own work.

Similarly, in Prynne's 1972 "A Letter to Douglas Oliver", in which he discusses Oliver's *The Harmless Building*, he admires that which Oliver himself admires in the work of Prynne. The "closely cross-woven"[135] and controlled text that Prynne sees in Oliver's work would seem to parallel that same "tight music of [the] stanzas"[136] which Oliver praises in Prynne. Prynne thinks it "rare" and "truly exciting" to find his full and alert attention demanded, and furthermore "to find it then taken up and used".[137] It is this kind of attention which Prynne too demands of his critics.

In 1973, Prynne wrote a criticism of volumes IV, V, and VI of Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems* which, bearing in mind similarities between his own work and Olson's, amounts again to a statement of his own poetic. In this piece he looks, for instance, at the "declines and splittings of awareness" which his own poetry confronts as it fights to free itself of the political and cognitive partialities governing the various systems of language and knowledge available to man. He also talks of a writing which is "not secondary assemblage but primary writing",[138] a writing which, it could be argued, he himself aspires towards, and indeed attains.

Another prose piece, "Readers Lockjaw",[139] a critique of three bulletins by Paul St. Vincent, published in 1978, is interesting not only in that it markedly manifests that elegant complexity of language found in Prynne's poetry, but also in that it too has been found relevant to critical appraisals of his work. As it explores the ironies bred of a multiplicity of perspectives it reflects, for instance, Geoffrey Ward's discussion of Prynne's poetry in "Nothing but Mortality",[140] as Ward himself acknowledges in his footnotes.

Simon Jarvis also studies Prynne's prose in order to illuminate his exploration of the notion of "quality". In his discussion of "Aristeas",

Jarvis quotes from Prynne's 1982 "A Letter to Andrew Duncan", in order to illustrate the way in which Prynne does justice to the non-identical, in which he marks that which is qualitatively different. This is just one small example of the matters Prynne deals with in this particular prose piece which Jarvis himself describes as an "extended statement of Prynneian poetics".[141]

Another lengthy prose piece by Prynne is "China Figures", a review of an anthology of early Chinese love poetry, published in 1982. Here he admires that very "controlled and controlling artifice",[142] which, as Veronica Forrest-Thomson suggested, is found in his own poems. Furthermore, his recognition of the way in which these translations help elucidate the ideas and practises of poetry in sixth century Chinese Culture, reveals that scholarly erudition so frequently encountered in Prynne's own work.

This same unconventional erudition is also manifested in Prynne's "Warton Lecture": "English Poetry and Emphatical Language". Here Prynne enters into a meticulous yet sparkling examination of what he describes as the "rather prominent but undernoticed exclamatory particle."[143] Looking at the word "Oh" as it is used in various contexts of English literature he shows how it both marks and performs moments of culminative emphasis in poetic speech. Prynne manifests that playfulness of vision, coupled with precise attention to detail, which his own poetry often demands of its readers.

Finally I would briefly like to mention Prynne's *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words*,[144] a transcript of "The William Matthews Lecture" published in 1993. In this inimitable, though highly unconventional piece of writing, Prynne takes as his subject the theme of arbitrariness. The "nature of the relation between the sense or meaning of a linguistic utterance...and the forms of its expression or performance".[145] He looks at the complex implications of this technical concept for the understanding and interpretation of poetic language.

In the course of this thesis I will be exploring certain aspects of this theme of linguistic arbitrariness as they may be applied to Prynne's own work. Therefore, it is to my own line of argument that I would now like to return.

I propose in this thesis to set the themes and perspectives of Prynne's work in the broad context of the Modernist and Postmodernist debate in British poetry. I intend, as has previously been suggested, to look at Prynne's work as it may be seen to effect a shift from a "high" Modernist to a Postmodernist poetic.

For this purpose I plan to explore Prynne's poetry through the use of modern literary theory. I aim to use the thought of Saussure, and that of other theoreticians whose work stems from his innovative ideas. I will employ Derrida, Kristeva and Lacan, for instance, to illuminate certain ideas and themes which, I would argue, lie latent in Prynne's texts. To a certain extent Prynne's work shares a historical context with that of these theoreticians. The majority of the work of Derrida, Kristeva and Lacan was published in the late sixties and throughout the seventies. It was at exactly this time that Prynne was publishing the main body of his poetry. *Kitchen Songs*, the first book in the collected edition of his works, was published in 1968, and between then and 1979 when *Down Where Changed* appeared, Prynne published ten separate books of poems.

However, I do not suggest that Prynne was making explicit reference to the thought of these modern theoreticians in his poetry, or that he in any way specifically intended such theory to be used as an analytical tool in the criticism of his work. In his own prose writing he makes no direct reference to modern literary theoretical thought, except perhaps, it should be noted, in his very recent *Stars, Tigers and the Shapes of Words*, in which he engages in some detail with the work of Saussure.

Nonetheless, in the context of the Modernism/Postmodernism debate in which I have chosen to locate Prynne's writing, I have found that the use of modern literary thought in readings of his poems has provided an

illuminating and relevant mode of analysis and interpretation. Indeed, while it may not be possible to demonstrate the direct influence of contemporary theory on Prynne's poems, it is possible to suggest that that poetry shares in the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, and to that extent may particularly lend itself to being read in the light of such theory.

In my discussion of Prynne I propose to concentrate on one particular volume of his work, that collection which he simply entitles, *Poems*.[146] This volume first appeared in 1982 and like most of his work was published by a small press, Agneau 2. This collected edition includes the contents of twelve separate books of poetry, published between 1968 and 1979, together with a few poems and sequences written during that period but previously unpublished, or appearing only in reviews. It introduces the reader to a substantial section of Prynne's poetry. Prynne did publish one book of poems prior to it, *Force of Circumstance and Other Poems*, which appeared in 1962. He has also published four new works since: *The Oval Window* in 1983, *Marzipan* in 1986, *Bands Around The Throat* in 1987, and *Word Order* in 1989. However, I have considered his collection, *Poems*, to represent a more than adequate basis to work from for the purpose of this thesis.

In addition to concentrating on this single collection, I have, furthermore, chosen to explore the themes of Prynne's poetry, not by way of a general overview of the whole body of work, but rather through a detailed discussion of a number of carefully selected, representative poems.

Taking my cue from the first sentence of *Poems*, I have entitled this thesis: *The Difficult Matter*. Prynne is not a poet whose work lends itself to easy analysis. His poetry is, as all its critics have acknowledged, difficult. In his questioning of traditional, foundational views of knowledge, of the possibilities of the transcendent, Prynne questions the fundamental concepts of Western thought. He confronts the existential philosophies of man. His viewpoints are necessarily complex as he explores the way that language can either generate or constrain the possibilities of cognition.

Prynne's poetry, I would argue, could be seen to manifest that basically Saussurean view of language which gives rise to Modern literary critical theory. The most radical feature of Saussure's thought rests on the idea of an essential disjunction between the world of "reality" and the world of language. Language, Saussure argues, articulates experience, giving form to what would otherwise be an indefinite plane of jumbled ideas, by dividing it into concepts (or signifieds), linked to the sound images (or signifiers) which express them through a process of linguistic convention. Hence, instead of things determining the meaning of words, words are considered to determine the meaning of things.

According to this Saussurean view, all thought is necessarily inscribed within language. Ideas cannot exist independently of the sign system which expresses them. Language is not subservient to some idea, intention, or referent which lies outside itself, but rather, the idea, intention or referent may exist only within language. Thus, "the difficult matter" of the title of this thesis is not only the complex philosophical subject matter which Prynne's poetry chooses to explore, its "difficult" content, but also, and necessarily, the language which inscribes this content. There is a fusion of the two. The meaning of a poem lies totally in the manner, in the language in which it is written, and the manner is, in every technical and tonal aspect, integral to the meaning.

The most serious critics of Prynne's poetry have all recognised this important interdependence of form and subject matter. There is, as Nigel Wheale explains in *The Times Literary Supplement*, a "complicity between what is being said and the manner of its saying".[147] Alan Halsley writes that the question of what Prynne's poetry "means" is ultimately inseparable from "*how* it says", yet, he declares, "that of 'saying' ought to precede that of 'meaning' in any careful analysis", for what the poem says is "wholly a function of the movement of its lines and its word- sound-play".[148]

One cannot discover the essence of one of Prynne's poems by skimming over the surface. The ideas informing his work are complex,

hence the routes of access to them are not presented as falsely immediate ones. The poetry resists easy consumption. Dense webs of signifiers offer no obvious edge for the analytically minded critic to seize hold of. In order to clarify, and at the same time to make problematic (and therefore salient), the existential fabric of life, Prynne twists and compacts the sinews of grammar and syntax into resistant, highly palpable nodes. The straightforward meaning, the assumed transparency of the most ordinary words and speech patterns is called into question. Prynne uses an intentionally delaying or blocking idiom so that the reader is slowed down, bewildered and barred in his reading, in order that he might be driven deep. It is only thus that Prynne can attempt to clarify the obstinate opaqueness of that "difficult matter" which he deals with.

The complexity of the vocabulary alone demands the closest attention. Prynne draws on a wide lexicon. Even where the vocabulary seems simple and the phrases plain, each word merits particular attention. Prynne plays on the hidden life of words, drawing on etymological derivations to enrich his texts, to work towards a root understanding of human existence. Indeed, the poem, "Die A Millionaire", begins with the phrase: "The first essential is to take knowledge / back to the springs"(13), and ends with the lines:

> Know
> the names. It is as simple as the purity
> of sentiment: it is as simple
> as that.(17)

The reader of Prynne's poetry is asked to become a researcher. In "The Numbers", for example, the first poem in the collection, one finds the lines:

> Signs or array,
> we should take this, we should
> really do so. There is no other
> *beginning* on power.
> Such is to elect terms,
> to be the ground for names.

We should come to the other thing, the in-
fluence of terminal systems, from there...
Here is the elect, the
folds of our intimate surface.(11-12)

The parataxis of the first two phrases leaves it unclear exactly what it is that the demonstrative "this" gestures towards. Whether the "this" that "we should take" is a reference to the "Signs or array", or not. The indeterminacy is deliberate. That which the demonstrative pronoun alludes to remains unclear because the "intimate surface" confronted by each reader is various and is to be taken up by the readers rather than defined or prescribed by the poetry.

It would seem that Prynne doesn't want to be "understood" in the conventional sense of the word, whereby understanding would entail the possibility of re-stating and summarising in analytic diagnosis or paraphrasis, the content of his work. His poetic is such that it cannot finally be reconciled to traditional manners of ratiocination and linear argument. Rather the poems solicit an experiencing and acceptance. They ask that the reader should suspend in himself the conventions of orthodox logic and unexamined grammar in order to deeply "feel" some possibility of apprehension which has long remained buried under the surface of traditional and analytically credible saying.

To read one of Prynne's poems with any degree of penetration is to sense the dynamics and process of its text rather than to understand its logic or finish. As in a drawing by Rembrandt, in which the pencilled lines reveal less a sense of form than a searching for it, the repetitions, reconsiderations, hesitations, and qualifications in Prynne's poetry are essential. A reader does not so much read a poem, as relive the writing of it.

It is for this reason that almost all critical articles on Prynne concentrate upon close readings of his texts. For example, Douglas Oliver, Simon Jarvis, Geoffrey Ward, Neil Reeve and Richard Kerridge, all centre their discussions of Prynne around a single poem. Even the more general

pieces of critical writing such as David Trotter's reading of *Brass* or Alan Halsley's review of *Poems*, quote extensively from Prynne's texts and analyse their formal qualities in some detail. Prynne's work, it appears, cannot be properly negotiated by more abstract discussion. Indeed, as Douglas Oliver suggests, the best approach to Prynne's poetry may be "to read, humbly and willing to learn, along the chronological sequence of composition".[149]

I have therefore considered it necessary to structure this thesis around a selection of individual poems rather than around a more general overview of Prynne's work. I have deliberately selected poems which I have not found discussed in detail in any other critical articles. At the risk of repetition, I have taken each poem and followed it through slowly, phrase by phrase, even word by word, trying to explore not all the meanings of the text, not all the arguments and informations which animate it, but some of those more important forms and codes which make the meanings possible. I have tried to trace the way in which each poem blossoms and disperses, each in its uniquely individual way, as it assembles around itself some aura of imaginative and philosophical reference.

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135. J.H Prynne, "from 'A Letter to Douglas Oliver' ", *Grosseteste Review* 6 (1973), p.152.
136. Oliver, p.102.
137. Prynne, "To Douglas Oliver", p.152.
138. J.H. Prynne, "Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems: IV, V, VI", Io* 16 (1972-1973), p.91.
139. J.H. Prynne, "Reader's Lockjaw", *Perfect Bound*, Issue 5 (1978), pp.73-77.
140. Ward, p.151, footnote 3.
141. Jarvis, p.72.
142. J.H. Prynne, "China Figures", *Modern Asian Studies* 17, No. 4 (1983), p.678.
143. J.H. Prynne, "English Poetry and Emphatical Language: The Warton Lecture on English Poetry", in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXXIV (1988), p.136.
144. J.H. Prynne, *Stars, Tigers and the Shapes of Words: The William Matthews Lectures, 1992*", (London: Birkbeck College, 1993).
145. Ibid., p.1.
146. J.H. Prynne, *Poems* (London and Edinburgh: Agneau 2, 1982). Subsequent references to and quotations from this volume are accompanied by page numbers in the text. Line numbers are omitted, firstly because they are omitted in this volume and secondly because it is often deliberately unclear in Prynne's works, whether the text is intended to be one or several poems. See for example: *Day Light Songs*, *High Pink on Chrome*, or *Down Where Changed*.
147. Wheale, *T.L.S.* p.661.
148. Halsley, p.77.
149. Oliver, p.95.

CONCERNING QUALITY, AGAIN

So that I could mark it; the continuance of
quality could in some way be that, the time
of accord. For us, as beneath the falling water
we draw breath,
look at the sky.
Talking to the man hitching a lift back
from the hospital, I was incautious in sympathy:
will she be back soon I was wishing to
encourage his will to suppose. I can hardly
expect her back he said and the water
fell again, there was this sheet, as the time
lag yawned, and quality
became the name you have,
like some anthem to the absent forces of nature.
Ethnic loyalty, breathe as you like we in fact
draw it out differently, our breath is gas
in the mind. That awful image of choking.

We *have* no mark for our dependence, I would
not want to add a little red spot to the wrist of
the man in the newsreel, the car passing the lights.
I draw blood whenever I open my stupid mouth,
and the mark is on *my* hand, I
can hardly even feel the brass wire
nailed down into the head.
Paranoid, like the influencing machines; but who
they are, while their needs shine out like flares,
that quality *is* their presence outward to the night
sky: they do ask for that casual aid. The re-
cognition is accident, is an intolerable fall like
water. We whizz on towards the blatant home
and the armies of open practice. His affairs are
electric; they cancel the quality of the air;
the names are a blankness as
there are no marks but the wounds.

Even the accord, the current back (for him as for

me outward) has an electric tangent. He could
have flown off just as he was. Simply
moved sideways, in his sitting posture, across the
next hedge and into a field I know but could
not recognise. The mark is Abel's price, the
breath is blood in the ears as I even dare to think
of those instruments. The sky is out there with
the quality of its pathic glow, there is a bright
thread of colour across the dashboard; the accord
is that cheap and we live
with sounds in the ear
which we shall never know.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCERNING QUALITY, AGAIN

The philosopher, Plato, stands alongside Aristotle as a thinker whose ideas have shaped the entire intellectual tradition of the West. His theory of Forms, expounded in the *Phaedo*, has engendered the whole of Western metaphysics down to the time of Nietzsche.

In an age of Sophistic scepticism Plato posited this theory in an attempt to re-establish belief in the possibility of pure knowledge. He postulated the existence of ultimate truths, eternal, immutable entities: "simple self-existent and unchanging...not admitting of variation at all, or in any way, or at any time".[1] Plato termed these absolute entities the Forms. Yet, although he suggests that these Forms really do exist, human senses, he declares, cannot apprehend them. "Sight and hearing...[are] inaccurate witnesses"; the soul "in attempting to consider anything in company with the body...is obviously deceived"(204). The body, it appears, is nothing but an impediment which prevents the soul from clear thinking. "[I]f we would have pure knowledge of anything", Plato writes, we must be "quit of the body" so that "the soul in herself [might] behold things in themselves"(205).

The logical conclusion to this is that men may only ever "attain the wisdom which [they] desire"(p205) when they are dead, when their souls are freed from their bodies. However, the *Phaedo* suggests that for so long as a man is alive, he should attempt, as far as possible, to avoid all contact and association with the corporeal: "In this present life I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible intercourse or communication with the body"(206). The man who searches for truth with an unaided intellect, with "the mind alone...with the very

light of the mind in her own clearness", is he who is most "likely to attain the knowledge of true being"(205).

It is this Platonic philosophy which, I would argue, may be seen to be reflected in Prynne's "Concerning Quality, Again"(81). The poem may be read as a disquisition upon the theory of Forms, as an exploration of Platonic modes of thought made in the light of modern literary theory.

Modern literary theory, stemming from the work of Saussure, views all thought to be necessarily inscribed within linguistic sign systems, (see p.40 above). However, as a reading of "Concerning Quality, Again" reveals, this sign system is, by its very nature, incapable of apprehending that which is absolute. Where Plato considered the physical body to be an impediment to the intellect, Prynne postulates that it is not so much man's corporeal structure which prevents him from the attainment of pure knowledge, as those structures of language within which the human intellect is inscribed. The poem dramatises the sense in which all language, and the self that is co-extensive with it, are necessarily second-hand, alienated and flawed.

This concern with the failure of language to hold the ideal arises from a tension between Platonic and Saussurean modes of thought; between traditional foundationalist beliefs and radical, Modernist theories concerned to question and subvert such conventional viewpoints. To clarify this further I intend to provide a brief synopsis of certain, central Poststructuralist developments in linguistic theory, in order to trace the way in which the Saussurean ideas that generate these developments diverge from more traditional models of philosophical thought.

Western philosophy, with Plato as an exemplary first instance, has generally acted on the presupposition that all forms of thought base themselves on some external point of reference such as the notion of absolute Truth. Language is considered to be subservient to some idea, intention or referent which lies outside itself. Ideas or content of any kind are, by implication, assumed to exist independently of the language in

which they are formulated, and language is viewed as a secondary medium, the vehicle or instrument of some concept or thought which governs it from without.

The French Poststructuralist philosopher, Jaques Derrida, disagreed with this Platonic model. He coined the term "logocentrism" to describe its modes of thought. Such logocentrism, he said, was at odds with the Saussurean claim that it is language which is primary, that concepts and meaning, rather than preceding language, are an effect produced by it. In order to counteract logocentrism of any kind, Derrida introduced a notion for which he coined the term, *différance*. The word is ambiguous and therefore impossible to translate. Unlike English, French has not developed two verbs from the Latin *differre*, but has maintained the senses of both "to differ", and "to defer", hence, as Jefferson explains, Derrida's coinage, *différance*, is "derived from the French *différer* which means both 'to defer, postpone, delay' and 'to differ, be different from' ".[2] The two senses are needed, Jefferson goes on to say:

> to explain both the fact that any element of language relates to other elements in a text, and the fact that it is distinct from them. The function or meaning of an element is never fully present because it depends on its association with other elements to which it harks back and refers forward. At the same time, its existence as an element depends on its being distinct from other elements.[3]

Différance is not some absolute entity or origin which determines language from without. It has quite a different status and function from that of truth in logocentric modes of thought. *Différance* is, Derrida writes, "the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences".[4] Meaning in language is endlessly deferred. There is no final, inviolate element, no fundamental unit, no transcendental signified, which, as meaningful in itself, would escape the ceaseless interplay of linguistic deferral and difference. Rather, as Jefferson explains, "there is nothing outside the text, nothing except the text".[5]

It is this Derridean theory of language which is reflected in Prynne's "Concerning Quality, Again". The poem, as forthcoming discussion will show, recognises human consciousness to be necessarily and inescapably inscribed within a symbolic sign system in which the full presence of meaning is endlessly deferred. Representation within this sign system precludes the attainment of pure knowledge. However, this does not necessarily mean that the poem negates all foundationalist modes of thought. Whilst revealing man to be inevitably inscribed within a spatio-temporal system, "Concerning Quality, Again" does not refuse or deny the existence of some "other" sphere of immaculate ideation, some realm which might exist beyond and outside this system. Rather, through attempting to come to terms with the notion of "Quality", the poem tries to allude beyond the linguistic sign systems which inscribe the human intellect and towards some concept of the absolute which, paradoxically, may never be conceived.

The word, "Quality", as it is used without an article, may be defined as that "aspect of things under which they are considered in thinking or speaking of their nature, condition or properties"(OED). The quality of something would be its essential nature, that which, as inherent to and inseparable from it, gives it its fundamental character. "Quality" as an abstract absolute would seem, perhaps, to allude to some ultimate essence of Being beyond and distinct from any concrete particulars which project its condition to man's senses. It would seem to allude to some Platonic notion of absolute "Quality" as it might exist, independently of human sensibilities in a transcendent realm of Forms.

To enquire into the nature or "Quality" of Being is the only proper object of ontological thought. It is not surprising, therefore, to find a frequent recurrence of the word, "quality", both in the titles and texts of Prynne's poems. He returns to the subject time after time, exploring the way in which man finds himself inscribed within a symbolic sign system which regards the qualities of things as somehow irrelevant to their

exchange value within this system. He illustrates again and again the idea that there is no transparent conceptual medium which would give direct access to the qualitative nature of existence, to its essence or quiddity.

Prynne recognises that any logical analysis or formal definition of "Quality" would be inadequate. He realises that in inquiring into this abstract concept he is inquiring into something which man can barely grasp, something which is hardly more than the sound of a word for him. Yet, in "Concerning Quality, Again", a poem caught between a nostalgic belief in the Platonic realm of perfect ideation, and a Modernist acknowledgment that human thought is necessarily a product of linguistic structures, Prynne questions and explores whether the notion of "Quality", of that which is the essence of Being, has passed totally from human conceptualisation. He asks whether there is some sort of embodied experience, some form of apprehension, in which a primal essence, a quiddity anteceding any subjective act of cognition, remains vital and therefore, in some indirect way, recapturable.

The title of the poem, "Concerning Quality, Again", recognises the difficulty of explaining the abstract concept with which it deals. The preposition, "Concerning", indicates that "Quality" may only be "referred to" or "touched upon"(OED) by the ensuing text, never fully defined by it, whilst the adverb, "Again", implies that the poem is neither the first nor final word upon the subject, but part of an ongoing process of definition which may never reach an ending.

The opening phrase indicates that the poem is to concern itself with the language through which a definition of "Quality" is attempted. The poem begins: "So that I could mark it", where to "mark", to "express or indicate by marks or signs"(OED), may be interpreted as to use the sign system of language. Indeed, to "mark" may be even more specifically defined as to "indicate in writing"(OED).

This language, however, is revealed to be inadequate to the expression of the abstract concept of "Quality":

> So that I could mark it; the continuance of
> quality could in some way be that, the time
> of accord.

Here the conditional mood of the verbs, along with the deliberate vagueness of "in some way", suggest that any expression of quality can only ever be provisional and approximate. A semi-colon, breaking the sentence where syntactically it would not be expected, separates the pronoun from its noun, implying that the abstract concept pronominated can never be inscribed within the text. The absolute, the poem suggests, can only ever be imperfectly evoked within the structures of language.

The introductory chapter to this thesis has discussed the basic Saussurean ideas upon which contemporary literary theory rests. Linguistic signs, as they are constituted by a sound-image or signifier, and a concept or signified, have been shown to be arbitrary in so far as the association between signifier and signified has been postulated as the product of linguistic convention rather than any natural link. From this premise Saussure goes on to argue that words are identified not by virtue of any intrinsic quality but by their difference from one another. "In a language", Saussure writes, "there are only differences *and no positive terms*".[6]

"Concerning Quality, Again" appears to allude to this Saussurean view of language through its use of the verb, "mark". In so far as a "mark" is "a token or indication of some fact or quality"(OED), the poem would seem to suggest that the marks or signs of language are essentially only representative. There is no intimate or necessary connection between the signifier and its signified. Furthermore, where to "mark" may be defined as to "separate...by drawing a boundary line or imposing a distinctive mark"(OED), the verb would seem specifically to evoke the way in which language divides the continuum of experience into the differential units through which (as Saussure explains), meanings may be constructed.

It is this Saussurean principle of differential which Derrida develops in his theory of *différance*. Signification, he explains, is only achieved

through a process which actively defers meaning from one element of the sign system onto other differential elements. There is a kind of unending interaction between the presence of one signifier and the absence of another. Meaning is constructed through a spatio-temporal chain of signification, an open-ended and non-teleological play of signifiers. A linguistic system, therefore, may never inscribe some ultimate, transcendental signified, meaningful in itself, fully present to itself, requiring no origin and no end other than itself.

Language is essentially differential and can never describe that which is unitary. It can never express that transcendent realm of Forms, that "region of purity, and eternity, and immortality, and unchangeableness"(222) described by Plato in the *Phaedo*. It is not some absolute concept of "Quality" which the speaker of Prynne's poem attempts to communicate, but a spatio-temporal concept of quality, the "continuance of quality", which is itself represented as "the time / of accord".

The speaker of the poem could not attempt anything but such a temporal description for he cannot be seen as existing in any sense apart from that differential system of language within which he represents himself. Man becomes co-extensive with language. The speaking voice, the "I" that defines its identity in relation to the other, "it", is positioned by virtue of its self-consciousness within a symbolic structure, and hence must stand always outside the object of reflection and representation. The second phrase of the poem illustrates this. The demonstrative, "that", indicates that "that" concept which is referred to is less accessible, and at a further positioning from the speaker, situated as he is within language, than would have been suggested had the demonstrative, "this", been used instead. The distinction between self and the other, between subject and object, which is the very premise of self-consciousness, destroys union and hence precludes man from full apprehension of the absolute.

The closest man can approach to an attainment of the ideal is, the poem suggests, to reach towards some state of "accord", some "agreement or

harmonious correspondence between things"(OED), in which a sense of mutuality might dissolve the divisions between subject and object.

The poem moves on to portray this "time of accord" by means of an image in which the plural pronouns, "us" and "we", gesturing towards some sort of reciprocity between self and other, come in marked contrast to the previous use of the first person singular.

> For us, as beneath the falling water
> we draw breath,
> look at the sky.

The external referent of this state "beneath the falling water" is curiously elusive. The image appears to withdraw itself from temporal and spacial certainty and thus to gesture towards some transcendent realm beyond. The evocations of "water", "breath", and "sky", resonate with the recurrent imagery of Prynne's poetry to evoke some metaphysical state of wholeness and unity of Being. For example, in the poem, "Oil"(79), the "floating completeness" of "perfect" oil is presented with the "cycle of days" passing over it "like damp air", with the "wind dripping with rain" in "the sight of [its] eye". Man's "pathway", as he somehow merges with the oil, goes down into "the breathing touch of the air, the rain / which soaks into our clothes". Prynne's book, *Daylight Songs*, opens with similar imagery: "Inhale breath deeply", the speaking voice says, for there in breathing "the mountain is", the respiring mountain which "is equal to / the whole"(26).

The imagery resonates with that of "Concerning Quality, Again" to create a consistent metaphoric network by virtue of which images seem to attain a symbolic value, gesturing beyond the phenomenal towards some "other" ideal realm. Indeed, Cirlot[7] explains, water is an almost universal symbol for transcendence, whilst to breathe may be symbolically interpreted as to assimilate spiritual power.

The symbol, writes Coleridge in "The Statesman's Manual": "always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates

the whole, abides itself a living part in that Unity of which it is representative".[8] This explanation recalls Plato's own description of the interrelationship between the things of this world and the transcendental Forms. This interrelation is generally expressed in the *Phaedo* by one of two metaphors: imitation, the relationship of copy to pattern; and participation, the relation of part to whole.

However, Prynne's "Concerning Quality, Again" cannot simply be read as a Symbolist text. The image of the state "beneath the falling water" cannot just be accepted as the symbolic embodiment of some ideal content not otherwise expressible within language. The use of the conditional tense in the poem's opening lines has provisionalised the image from the start. Furthermore, it does not purport to be an image of absolute Quality, but an image of a temporal notion of quality, "the continuance of quality", which itself is in turn represented as "the time of accord". This notion of accord, of "harmonious correspondence"(OED), echoes the Pythagorean idea discussed in Plato's *Phaedo*, the notion that the soul is "the harmony of the elements of the body"(230). Plato emphatically refutes this idea. Harmony, he says, is not absolute. It is a "compound"(236). The soul by which man may apprehend the Forms is "a far diviner thing than harmony"(240). Furthermore (as this reading of "Concerning Quality, Again" will go on to show), the images of water and breath are not consistently used to evoke the transcendent. Their value as symbols of the metaphysical is later refused. They come to be seen, perhaps, more as an allusion to earthly "water", "mist" and "air", which, Plato explains, are nothing more that the "sediment", the dregs of some transcendental world of Forms, some "pure heaven"(257). It is thus, I would suggest, that Prynne's image of the state "beneath the falling water" is better interpreted not as the symbolic representation of some ideal metaphysical realm, but rather as an emotional evocation of a corporeal state through which the transcendent may in some way be sensed.

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art", writes T.S.

Eliot in his essay "Hamlet", "is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for that *particular* emotion".[9] "Concerning Quality, Again" appears to seek just such a "formula" for the "time of accord".

> For us as beneath the falling water
> we draw breath,
> look at the sky.

The simplicity of the syntax, the smooth shift of the rising rhythms saved from restlessness by the calming consecutive stresses of "draw breath / look"; the soft sibilance of "us" and "as"; the peaceful assonance of "falling", "water", "draw"; the clear velar consonants of "look" and "sky"; all seem to evoke some shared state of calm passivity. The poem suggests that accord, in so far as it can be attained, in so far as man can "look at the sky" (where the sky is traditionally symbolic of "purity" and "the Supreme Deity"),[10] is attained through some sort of unselfconscious emotional feeling, some embodied experience in which consciousness is decentred and diffused. No longer an agent of action in the world, man becomes instead a function through which impersonal forces pass and intersect.

Enlightenment theories of knowledge embrace systems of thought which, descending from the philosophies of Descartes, rest upon the authorities of subject-centred reason. A hidden core of truth is believed to be discoverable by the rational mind. The image of this state "beneath the falling water" would seem to recognise the inadequacy of such traditional rationalist and empiricist methodologies. That ultimate truth to which man aspires, the poem suggests, eludes the orderings of conscious conceptualisation. It resists the manipulative structures of Cartesian rationality.

It is this emotionally felt "accord", this embodied correspondence with some "otherness" which lies beyond the structures of traditional and analytically credible saying, which the speaker of the poem tries to establish in the next lines:

> Talking to the man hitching a lift back
> from the hospital, I was incautious in sympathy:
> will she be back soon I was wishing to
> encourage his will to suppose. I can hardly
> expect her back he said.

The conversational interchange between the two men in the car could be construed as some sort of "harmonious correspondence"(OED) or "accord", especially in so far as the verb, "talking", may specifically describe speech "of a familiar kind"(OED). This "accord" is to be emotionally sensed rather than conceptually grasped, in so far as it is to be attained through "sympathy", the "conformity of feeling"(OED). Furthermore, to "suppose" is to "assume (without reference to truth or falsehood) as the basis of an argument"(OED) and, as such, supposition would seem to be capable of refusing the prescribed sequences of conventional logic and rationality.

The poem, however, shows that the verbal encounter between the two men in the car cannot amount to an "accord". It has already been suggested that "accord" is emotionally sensed. Emotion, as the *The Oxford English Dictionary* explains, is a "mental 'feeling' or 'affection' as distinguished from...volitional states of consciousness". However, in these lines the speaker of the poem says that he was "wishing" to encourage the "will to suppose". Through his own volition he was trying to establish "accord" with another by in turn encouraging that other's volition. Volition is the "action of consciously willing"(OED). This state of consciousness is precluded from the attainment of "accord". To be conscious, to define oneself in relation to another (as in these lines the speaker, "I", defines himself in relation to the pronominated hitch-hiker), is to become co-extensive with language, and language, the poem has suggested, is incapable of apprehending the absolute. The adroit use of the verb, "wishing", as it may be defined as "expressing an...unrealisable desire"(OED), concisely reinforces this idea. Desire, explains the psycholanalytic theoretician Jaques Lacan, behaves in precisely the same way as a language. It moves ceaselessly on from object to object, as

language moves from signifier to signifier, without ever attaining full and present satisfaction. Language, therefore, cannot be assumed to communicate any single, inherent meaning which might somehow link the two conversants through the reciprocity of mutual understanding.

According to the logocentric thought shaped by Platonic philosophies, "[t]alking", or direct speech, is often privileged over writing on the assumption that it more directly expresses a meaning or intention that its speaker has in mind. Speech is assumed to be transparent to meaning in a way in which writing will never be, because writing is conventionally thought to copy speech rather than ideas themselves. This poem, however, reveals such phonocentricity to be a mere assumption. Although in these lines the speaker's mental intention is not separated by any form of punctuation from his spoken words (a suggestion that his intention is therefore directly present in his words), the poem reflects the Derridean idea of "intentionality".[11] As Derrida explains in his essay "Form and Meaning", man seems always bound to say something quite other than that which he would mean or like to say. The hitch-hiker's answer: "I can hardly / expect her back", reveals that he doesn't "suppose", he doesn't interpret the question as it was meant that he should. Whatever the speaker's intention, it is ultimately the hearer who must construct a signification for himself. There is, as Christopher Norris writes, no "inward and immediate realisation of meaning which yields itself up without reserve to perfect and transparent understanding".[12]

The language in which the speaker necessarily represents himself appears instead as a source of division between himself and his interlocutor. Water, formerly used to gesture symbolically towards some state of transcendent union, is represented now as a "sheet", an interface dividing the two conversants.

> and the water
> fell again, there was this sheet, as the time
> lag yawned, and quality
> became the name you have,
> like some anthem to the absent forces of nature.

A "sheet" exists in a spatial dimension. This combines with an allusion to the temporal: the "time / lag", to suggest a Derridean view of *différance*, a spatio-temporal conceptualisation of the controlling force within language. The dividing interface of the "sheet" aptly reflects the way in which the existence of each element of language depends on its distinction or division from other elements, whilst the notion of meaning as being somehow endlessly postponed or deferred through an open play of signifiers is succinctly imaged as a "time / lag", the "length of time separating two correlated physical phenomena"(OED).

According to the Derridean view of *différance*, meaning is produced by an interplay between presence and absence. It is this sense of absence which the poem now moves on to explore. The verb, "yawned", where to yawn is to "form a chasm, to gape"(OED), evokes the empty rifts and incompletions of language, gaps further suggested by the way in which the compound noun, "time / lag", is severed by line division.

Quality, as an abstract absolute, will always be absent from language. It may be present only as a "name", a symbolic designation, a "mere appellation in contrast or opposition to the actual... thing"(OED) referred to. Indeed, as Prynne writes in "A Sketch For A Financial Theory of Self": "names are *necessarily* false"(20). Linguistic communication is now compared to an "anthem to the absent forces of nature". It is represented as a formal, antiphonal reciprocity which, instead of constituting some correspondence, some vital echo or participatory engagement with the other, serves only to "mark" the absence of that other which it would strive to attain.

The first stanza of the poem concludes with an affirmation of the fact that to be human, and hence inscribed within language, is to be differentiated from the other and hence precluded from pure knowledge.

> Ethnic loyalty, breathe as you like we in fact
> draw it out differently, our breath is gas
> in the mind. That awful image of choking.

Man's identity is shaped by his culture and his society. However, culture functions like any other symbolic structure in that its individual elements have meaning only in so far as they are part of an overall system. As Roland Barthes: "culture in all its aspects is a language".[13] To be a product of one's culture is to be a product of a sign system. Thus, the adjective, "ethnic", may describe not only a common racial or cultural identity but can also be defined as "pertaining to or having common... linguistic characteristics"(OED). "Ethnic loyalty", a "faithful adherence"(OED) to one's race or nationality, would seem to be a form of "accord". However, the indifferent tone of the phrase, "breathe as you like", echoing as it does the colloquialism, "call it what you like", implies that it is a matter of indifference how one names or terms something. The mere fact that that thing is symbolically represented divides it from the mind that would apprehend it. "Ethnic loyalty" can never amount to that complete resolution of differences which would be perfect "accord", for to be aware of one's ethnic identity is to represent oneself as distinct from, and hence as divided from, others. The pronouns, "we" and "you", set in sharp contradistinction, emphasise this. Though the inhalation of breath might symbolise an assimilation of spiritual power, an apprehension of some transcendence, the exhalation of this same breath in speech is necessarily differentiated from that power. It is drawn out "differently", the poem says, where the adverb may be read as a succinct allusion to the Derridean idea of *différance*.

Language, the poem suggests, can only express what is known "in fact", where a "fact" may be defined as a "particular truth known by actual observation or authentic testimony, as opposed to what is merely inferred"(OED). After its provisional attempts to "mark" that which is absolute, the poem turns to an epexigetical statement asserting what is "in fact" the case: that the human mind is entrapped within the structures of a spatio-temporal system. Breath is "gas / in the mind", where gas, as a substance which is in the gaseous state "in ordinary terrestrial

conditions"(OED), is by its very definition temporal. "[G]as" also puns on its colloquial sense of "empty talk" or "bombast"(OED), thus reaffirming that language can only ever be an empty representation, an "awful image". Furthermore, the adjective, "awful", seems to recall and parody that tone of awe with which the Romantic poets wrote of transcendental vision. Man, Prynne suggests, as he represents himself within language, is "choking". If to breathe is to assimilate spiritual power, difficulty in breathing, Cirlot writes, "may therefore symbolise difficulty in assimilating the principles of the spirit and the cosmos"(33). To choke is to stop or interfere with breathing "by compression, blocking, fumes, emotion, or otherwise"(OED). On the most literal level of interpretation the choking described in this poem would be by the "fumes" of the "gas" in the mind. However, the phrase also suggests the "choking" of speech, the articulation of sound through the "compression or blocking"(OED) of breath by tongue, lips or palate. And finally, in so far as one may "choke with emotion", the poem implies that language chokes man's emotional sensitivity to that state of unselfconscious accord earlier evoked by the image of the state "beneath the falling water".

Plato's *Phaedo* describes the human body as an impediment whose presence "infects" the soul, preventing it from "acquiring truth and knowledge"(205). In the second stanza of "Concerning Quality, Again", Prynne, through equating the forms of a symbolic sign system with physical marks and structures, suggests that it is not simply the material body which prevents an apprehension of the absolute, but the linguistic system in which the human mind is inscribed.

The stanza opens:

> We *have* no mark for our dependence, I would
> not want to add a little red spot to the wrist of
> the man in the newsreel, the car passing the lights.

Man, the italicisation of the verb stresses, does not "*have*" any physical mark to indicate that he is utterly conditioned by symbolic systems. Indeed,

the speaker of the poem would not "want" to add any such material mark. He does not "want" to in the sense that he does not "need"(OED) to, any more than he needs to brand a "little red spot" on the "wrist of / the man in the newsreel" or "the car passing the lights", both manifest examples of existence as it is defined by that which is symbolic and representational and hence needing no additional sign to prove it. Furthermore, the speaker does not need to add this "little red spot" because he makes it whenever he speaks: "I draw blood whenever I open my stupid mouth".

This phrase, echoing as it does the earlier: "we draw breath", expresses the speaker's realisation that, positioned within language, he cannot "draw" or imbibe spiritual power, but only "blood". He marks himself as an earthly (rather than a spiritual) creature, in so far as blood, as "the supposed seat of animal or sensual appetite", is representative of "the fleshly nature of man"(OED). The earthly senses are "inaccurate and indistinct"(204), writes Plato in the *Phaedo*. They impede the soul in its quest for pure knowledge. Prynne implies that language is likewise inexact and misleading. The mouth, and by extension speech, is described as "stupid", its "faculties...deadened or dulled"(OED). It is as much man's representation of himself within symbolic sign systems as it is his embodiment within a corporeal structure which prevents him from attainment of the absolute.

Blood is a symbol of identity. As *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes, it is the "typical part of the body which children inherit from their parents and ancestors, hence that of parents and children, and of the members of a family or race, is spoken of as identical and as distinct from that of other families or races"(OED). It is in this light that the speaker of the poem, in drawing "blood" when he draws breath, reveals his identity to be co-extensive with language. "|A|nd the mark is on *my* hand", he declares. His self-consciousness is stressed by the italicisation of the possessive pronoun. Through the symbol of the hand which, Cirlot writes, is "the corporeal manifestation of the inner state of the human being"(137), the speaker

reasserts that man's self-consciousness, his inner state, is marked by language. Indeed, the physical body, represented in these lines as a series of dismembered fragments: "the wrist", "my...mouth", "my hand", "my head", metaphorises the way in which the conscious mind, inscribed within the differential systems of language, is fractured and hence precluded from apprehension of that which is pure and unitary.

Plato writes in the *Phaedo* that "each pleasure and pain is a sort of nail which nails and rivets the soul to the body" excluding it from having any part in "the communion of the divine and pure and simple"(227). It is to this image that "Concerning Quality, Again" would appear to allude in its next lines:

> I
> can hardly even feel the brass wire
> nailed down into the head.

In contrast to Plato, however, Prynne would seem to suggest that the rivet nails down not so much the body as the mind, "the head". The strand of wire may be taken as a metaphor for the sequential structures of the linguistic sign system. Identity, enchained within these sequences, is so much a part of them that the self can "hardly even feel" them as distinct from itself.

As the poem goes on, the mind riveted within language is described as: "Paranoid like the influencing machines". A "machine", a "structure of any kind, material or immaterial"(OED), again evokes the symbolic systems of language. It is these which are "[p]aranoid". Their representations give rise to a systematised state of delusion. The various forms of paranoia, *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes, are considered to belong to that schizophrenic group of mental illnesses "characterised by a breakdown in the relation between thoughts, feelings, and actions". "Concerning Quality, Again" implies that a schizophrenic "breakdown" in the mind's integrity is the direct result of the "influencing" language which inscribes it, for

language is indeed intrinsically "[p]aranoid" in so far as its significations are predicated by an interplay between presence and absence, between differences and deferrals.

This sense of absence and incompletion is the necessary condition of human existence. Men remain "but who / they are while their needs shine out like flares". Man is defined by his "need", his "lack or want of some necessary thing"(OED). Indeed, as Prynne writes in "A Sketch for a Financial Theory of Self":

> we give the name of
> our selves to our needs.
> We want what we are.(20)

Yet, as this poem also explains:

> we should
> have what the city does need,
> the sky, if we did not so
> want the need.(20)

Ironically, it is man's very condition of need which precludes him from attaining that which he most needs, that absolute purity imaged by the sky. According to Plato it is the needs of the body which prevent man from attaining this purity, for the body "fills [him] full of loves and lusts and fears and fancies of all kinds"(205) which lead his soul astray. However, in "Concerning Quality, Again", man's needs, in so far as they are equated with "flares" or signals, are again represented as a product of a symbolic sign system. Man will always be defined by a need or desire, a condition which "motivates behaviour towards its satisfaction"(OED) but will never attain that which it seeks, for language, like desire, must move ceaselessly on from object to object without ever attaining full and present satisfaction.

Recognising that men are defined by a condition of need, the poem goes on to assert that it is that very "quality" which "*is* their presence outward to the night / sky". The italicisation of the verb emphasises that

the actuality of man's condition, of his "presence" or "embodied self"(OED), is defined by the fact that, inscribed within the endlessly deferring structures of desire, he may never attain to completeness or ultimate satisfaction. Indeed, as Prynne writes in his later poem, "Questions for the Time Being":

> living in hope is so silly when our desires
> are so separate, not part of any mode or con-
> dition except language & there they rest on
> the false mantelpiece, like ornaments of style.(112)

Man is defined by his consciousness that he may never attain a state of completeness. Alluding back to the earlier description of the hitch-hiker returning from the hospital, the speaker says: "they *do* ask for that casual aid". Men, as the italicisation of the verb again emphasises, consciously and actively "ask for" that which they desire. The first stanza of the poem tried to evoke a state of "accord" in which a sense of incompletion, and hence desire, might somehow be satisfied through the passive diffusion of self. Now the poem implies that man, in asking for "casual aid", seeks just such an accord. "[A]id", as it may be defined as "[h]elp, sustenance [or] support"(OED), implies a mutuality. This mutuality, the poem suggests, is to a degree unselfconscious in that it is involuntary, it is "casual", "occuring or brought about without design or meditation"(OED).

Nevertheless, to recognise that the "quality" of men, that "aspect of [men] under which they are considered in thinking...of their nature"(OED), is this aspect of need, cannot amount to some sort of negative apprehension of the absolute. The very "re- / cognition" of this condition "is accident", where that which is accident is that which is "not essential to the conception of a substance"(OED) and hence not absolute. The poem moves on to represent this realisation as "an intolerable fall like / water". The simile resonates with that earlier image of the "sheet" of water, evoking once more the division and differentiation which characterises the human mind, precluding it from integral presence.

The philosopher, Heidegger, posits that the notion of being, of the quality or essence of man's existence, that which the Greeks termed *ousia*, or more fully *paraousia*, should be translated by a set or cluster of significations comprising "homestead, at-homeness, a standing in and by itself, a self-enclosedness, an integral presentness or thereness".[14] However, "Concerning Quality, Again", in its lines: "We whizz on towards the blatant home / and the armies of open practice", recognises that man's essential quality can never attain to an "at-homeness" such as the Greek *paraousia* would imply. Where the onomatopoeiac "whizz" evokes a vocalised exhalation of breath, the poem suggests that man, as he resides within language, does not progress towards a "home" of integral presentness, towards a "state...where [he] finds satisfaction"(OED), but rather may only reach towards that "blatant", that "noisy" and "glaringly conspicuous"(OED), "home" which is language. Indeed, the "armies of open practice" further metaphorise this. The linguistic sign system would certainly seem to be like an army in that it consists of a "vast assemblage"(OED) of elements. It also functions through a process of "open practice" for, where "practice" may mean "habit" or "custom"(OED), it would seem to connote that Saussurean view in which the association of signifier and signified is posited to be a product of linguistic convention. Furthermore, in describing this "practice" as "open", the poem recognises the linguistic system to be non-teleological and open-ended, incapable of ever attaining anything more than a "blatant" home, one that is "open" in the sense that is is obvious, "without concealment"(OED).

By its very presence, language cancels or annuls that which is absolute. The second stanza of the poem closes:

> His affairs are
> electric; they cancel the quality of the air;
> the names are a blankness as
> there are no marks but the wounds.

The imagery of electricity reflects that used in Prynne's earlier poem, "Die a Millionaire", in which the electrical grid becomes a "sign" of the way in which representation within symbolic systems necessarily precludes the possibility of pure knowledge:

> what starts as irrigation ends up
> selling the meggawatage across the grid.
>
> The grid is another sign, is knowledge
> in applique work actually strangled and latticed
> across the land; (14)

"Concerning Quality, Again" now picks up on this idea and suggests that, just as man harnesses "falling water" in order to generate electrical current, so "forces of nature" are transformed within language into currents or chains of signification. Language functions by the same principles as electricity. Where the flow of the latter is associated with the interaction of positively and negatively charged particles, so the chain of signification is produced through the differential relationships of its linguistic elements.

Inscribed within language, human "affairs" are also differential and hence "cancel the quality of the air", where air, de Vries writes, is symbolic of "the immaterial" or "the soul"(7). Language can only mark that which is absent from itself. The names "are a blankness" in the same way as "there are no marks but the wounds". In the context of this poem, the image of a physical wound, an "incision" or "separation of the tissues of the body"(OED) evokes an analagous mental "wound". Human consciousness is presented as quintessentially damaged or wounded.

The third stanza opens: "Even the accord, the current back (for him as for / me outward) has an electric tangent". The speaker of the poem continues to explore the nature of his encounter with the man hitching a lift home from the hospital. Some sort of "accord" was established between the two men, both through the offering of "casual aid" and through the reciprocities of conversation, but the speaker of the poem recognises that this mutuality never amounted to a resolution of differences. The

differential forces of language, again metaphorised as electrical current, may only form an "electric tangent" to the circularity which traditionally images unity and fullness of being. It can only touch upon it in a peripheral way, never circumscribe it.

Nonetheless, "Concerning Quality, Again" does not refuse the possibility of pure knowledge. In the *Phaedo* Plato writes:

> In this present life, I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible intercourse or communion with the body, and are not surfeited with the bodily nature, but keep ourselves pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us.
> (206)

It is this idea which is reflected in the next lines of "Concerning Quality, Again":

> He could
> have flown off just as he was. Simply
> moved sideways in his sitting posture, across the
> next hedge and into a field I know but could
> not recognise.

In one sense this passage could be interpreted as a description of a state in which man is somehow freed of his body. Taken literally, the image of the hitch-hiker flying off sideways whilst still "in his sitting posture" suggests the levitation that occurs in certain meditational states when gravity, and hence corporeal presence, are denied. In the context of this poem, however, these lines could equally imply that man may somehow free himself of the symbolic structures which inscribe his mind. If the hitch-hiker, instead of responding so literally to the question "will she be back soon", had moved mentally "sideways" evading the logical sequences through which a Cartesian rationality grasps the world, he might have been more sensitive to the compassionate intentions of the speaker. He might have more nearly attained some sympathetic mutuality, some state of "accord" in which a rigidly defined subjectivity begins to dissolve away.

Through this dissolution of self, the poem suggests, man can drift outwards towards some "other" plane of being, towards a "field" of spiritual rather than electrical force. It is this "field" of which the narrator speaks when he describes a field: "I know but could / not recognise".

In the *Phaedo*, Plato postulated a doctrine of recollection: "We must always have come into life having knowledge, and shall always continue to know as long as life lasts - for knowing is the acquiring and retaining of knowledge and not forgetting"(217). This "knowing" is the knowledge of the soul before our birth. Plato distinguishes it from the recollection which is prompted by man being reminded of one object by another. It is to this doctrine that Prynne's poem would now appear to allude. The speaker can "know" the "field" of metaphysical "otherness" with that knowledge which is the knowledge of his soul before his birth. Yet he cannot "recognise" it, for recognition, the "action or fact of perceiving that some thing...is the same as one previously known"(OED), requires perception. To perceive, *The Oxford English Dictionary* says, is to "apprehend with the mind; to become aware or conscious of, to...understand". However, "Concerning Quality, Again" has suggested that that which is absolute eludes the conceptualisations of the conscious mind. It resists the symbolic strutures within which human understanding and perception are essentially formulated.

To even "dare to think" of these symbolic structures, to conceptualise them, is to remain in an essentially human sphere:

> The mark is Abel's price, the
> breath is blood in the ears as I even dare to think
> of those instruments.

The poem alludes to the biblical story of the two brothers, Cain and Abel. The mark of language, that "mark" which the speaker has described as being "on *my* hand", is the price the human race, as it is descended from Cain, has paid for killing Abel, for killing breath, where the name Abel derives from the Hebrew "habel"(OED), meaning breath. The marks of

linguistic representation are equated with that "mark" which God set upon Cain to preserve his life. The speaker of the poem continues to echo this biblical myth as he says that the "breath is blood in the ears as I even dare to think / of those instruments". After the murder of Abel, God spoke to Cain saying: "the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground".[15] Language is equated with that weapon or instrument with which Cain wounded and killed Abel for, in so far as an instrument may be defined as that "which is used by an agent in or for the performance of an action"(OED), it evokes, in the context of this poem, the "instruments" or "machines" of the symbolic sign system. Indeed, language has been shown to "wound". There "are no marks but the wounds", the speaking voice said earlier. Thus, even to "dare to think" is to represent oneself within language and hence to kill breath, to destroy that "accord" between self and the other, that accord which is represented in the Genesiac story by the fraternal relationship of Cain and Abel.

When Cain sinned it was all mankind who was cursed. To be human is to be branded by the mark of Cain and hence, the poem goes on to suggest, to be inscribed within a symbolic sign system which displaces "quality". The book of *Genesis* lists the descendents of Cain, amongst whom is Tubalcain, "an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron".[16] The allusion recalls the earlier passage in "Concerning Quality, Again": "I / can hardly even feel the brass wire / nailed down into the head". In "A Note on Metal" Prynne further elucidates the significance of this. He explains how, although the beginnings of Western alchemy saw "quality as *essential*"(126), with the emergence of metal technologies a new way was developed. Property came to reside in substance, and a gradual transfer was effected from "life as power" to "the more settled expectation of reaping what you have sown"(127), until gradually "even the theoretic properties of metal are...displaced into the stratified functionalism of a monetary system"(129).

Through a complex web of allusions "Concerning Quality, Again"

reasserts that man is riveted to a line of descendence in which the apprehension of an essential nature or quality is displaced by an understanding of this quality only in terms of its equivalence within a medium of exchange. As Prynne explains it in "A Sketch for a Financial Theory of Self", the "qualities as they continue...the silk under the hand"(19) are displaced by "money, and / the absurd trust in value"(20). The medium of exchange substituted for quality is, "Concerning Quality, Again" suggests, the symbolic sign system of language. To exist within this system is "Abel's price", the price that is paid for killing the breath of spiritual apprehension.

However, despite this recognition and demonstration of man's inevitable inscription within language, as Prynne's poem draws to its conclusion it firmly posits its belief in the existence of some immaculate realm of ideation existing beyond such spatio-temporal systems:

> The sky is out there with
> the quality of its pathic glow, there is a bright
> thread of colour across the dashboard; the accord
> is that cheap and we live
> with sounds in the ear
> which we shall never know.

The sky which, as de Vries explains, is a symbol of "purity" or "Supreme Deity"(428), is used again and again in Prynne's poetry to image transcendence. The "qualities", described in "A Sketch For A Financial Theory Of Self" make "their celestial / progress across the sky"(19). "Treatment in the Field" sets corporeal man, burning with desire, in opposition to some transcendental vision of "light darting / over and over, through a clear sky"(214). "3 Sentimental Tales", opening with the phrase "further towards the / sky", juxtaposes this image of eternity against that of a "cord"(104) of time binding man within the routines of human existence.

Now, "Concerning Quality, Again" asserts the existence of the "sky" as being "out there" beyond man. Its "glow" evokes, perhaps, that light which, Cirlot says, is "traditionally equated with the spirit"(187). The

adjective, "pathic", is significant. In so far as it may mean "passive"(OED), it reflects the earlier suggestion that "quality" may be apprehended when consciousness is diffused and self becomes a passive function through which impersonal forces pass and intersect. Yet "pathic" may also be defined as "|p|ertaining to suffering"(OED). The poem has presented human consciousness as a field of pain and it is the "glow" of this suffering, man's awareness that he is in some way wounded or damaged, which will somehow disclose his "quality" to him.

The reflection of this "pathic glow" casts "a bright / thread of colour across the dashboard". A "dashboard", a panel on which electrical instruments and controls are mounted, seems in the context of this poem to suggest the linguistic systems controlling human life. These systems are now presented as being interwoven with some indirect, reflected notion of the absolute. To sense this "otherness", the poem suggests, would be in some way to approach an "accord" with it, an attainment of that integrity from which language is essentially precluded.

"|T|he accord / is that cheap". It is "cheap" as compared to the "price" man pays for Abel's death, the price he pays for being inscribed within language, yet "we live / with sounds in the ear / which we shall never know". Man lives within a linguistic system which is secondary and alienated. It can, therefore, never be known with that knowledge of the soul before our birth.

The ending of "Concerning Quality, Again" seems to reflect the paradoxical conclusion which Plato reaches in the *Phaedo*. Plato explains that if man is ever to have pure knowledge of anything he must be totally freed of his body. The logical conclusion to this would be that he must die, must cease to be human. Prynne's poem similarly suggests that to attain full apprehension of "other", to complete oneself in a state of absolute integrity, may only be achieved at the self-contradictory cost of dying out of language and hence of losing that very self-consciousness which defines one as human.

However, even whilst recognising that man can never apprehend the absolute, the poem does not deny the existence of this absolute. It does not refuse the notion of perfect "Quality", of some totally determinate attribute of things. "Concerning Quality, Again" seems to gesture towards a notion of absolute "Quality", even whilst acknowledging itself to be, inevitably, a construct of those very sign systems which would preclude apprehension of any such perfect essence.

The poem, in its attempt to explore the nature of Being, uses a language which is resistant to easy interpretation. Its dense web of signifiers challenges the simple analytic conceptualisation which would edge man away from the genuinely ontological and towards the merely theoretical. By making tangible the knotted surfaces of language, the poem points beyond itself towards an acknowledgement of that which is distinct from language, towards some possibility of apprehension which has long remained buried beneath the surface of traditional and analytically credible saying. By somehow feeling language to be other than oneself one may reach, the poem suggests, towards an apprehension of some imaginary unity or space of pure being which lies anterior to language and to the construction in language of the self-conscious and divided self.

Against the clotted surfaces of its syntax the poem posits its assertions of a transcendent "otherness" in contrastingly lucid terms. The state "beneath the falling water" is described with a simplistic vocabulary, and there is a refreshing clarity in the statement: "the sky is out there". Simple phrases seem to detach themselves from the knots of conceptual struggle, seeking instead some innate feeling, some voiceless sensitivity to the grain and substance of physical existence. The poem appears to seek that fundamental quiddity or "quality" of things through which a primal sense of essence, anteceding any general or particular act of cognition, is somehow apprehended. As Prynne expresses it in "Die a Millionaire":

It is as simple as the purity
of sentiment: it is as simple
as that.(17)

"Concerning Quality, Again" repeatedly reveals language to be inadequate. It abrogates syntax, enacting the point that some meaning can be conveyed within language, but not everything. Something is always eluding language and the poem reflects this by leaving things out. It constantly refers to that which is absent from language, that which is cancelled or anulled by it. Man is made aware of his woundedness.

The poem suggests that it is through this sensitivity to his woundedness that man might attain a negative apprehension of the "otherness" he seeks. Through his recognition that something is absent the speaker somehow acknowledges that which lies beyond language. As the "glow" of the sky casts a thread of reflected colour across the dashboard of the car, so the sequences of language are interwoven with an indirect reflected notion of that which is absolute, of that which eludes all conscious conceptualisation.

Man, whilst he remains human, will never fully apprehend that "Quality" which makes him what he is. Yet, I would argue, it is through the very recognition of this fact that Prynne's "Concerning Quality, Again" actually presents the "Quality" of man. Amongst all created beings it is man alone who experiences existence as problematic. He alone is a being which seeks a relation to the ontological, to absolute Being itself. As Levinas writes: the "understanding of Being is the determining attribute and fundamental fact of human existence".[17] If man were to apprehend absolute "Quality", if he were to understand the essence of Being, he would cease to be human, for it is in the very fact that man finds the notion of "Quality" problematic, that the essence of human "Quality" lies.

1. Plato, *Phaedo*, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, third edition, revised and translated by B.Jowett, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), II, p.221. Subsequent quotations from this edition are accompanied by page numbers in the text.
2. Ann Jefferson, "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism" in *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*, edited by Ann Jefferson and David Robey, 2nd edition (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1986), p.114.
3. Ibid., p.114
4. Jaques Derrida, "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), p.11
5. Jefferson, *Modern Literary Theory*, p.116.
6. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, with the collaboration of Albert Reidlinger, translated by Roy Harris (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1983), p118.
7. J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, translated by Jack Sage, second edition (London: Routledge, 1971), p.364-367 and p.32. Subsequent quotations from this edition are accompanied by page numbers in the text.
8. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Statesman's Manual" in *Lay Sermons*, edited by R.J. White, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, general editor Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973) V1, p.30.
9. T.S. Eliot, "Hamlet", in *Selected Essays: 1917-1932* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1932), p.145.
10. Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, revised edition (Amsterdam and London: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1976), p.428. Subsequent quotations from this edition are accompanied by page numbers in the text.
11. Derrida, "Form and Meaning", *Margins of Philosophy* p.162.
12. Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Methuen, 1982), p.28.
13. Quoted by Jefferson, *Modern Literary Theory*, p.93.
14. Quoted by George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1978), p.49.
15. Genesis 4. 10.
16. Genesis 4. 22.
17. Quoted by Steiner, *Heidegger*, p.71.

THE COMMON GAIN, REVERTED

The street is a void in the sequence of man,
as he sleeps by its side, in rows that house
his dreams. Where he lives, which is the
light from windows, all the Victorian grandeur
of steam from a kitchen range. The street
is a void, its surface slips, shines and is
marked with nameless thoughts. If we could
level down into the street! Run across by
the morning traffic, spread like shadows, the
commingling of thoughts with the defeat we
cannot love

Those who walk heavily
carry their needs, or lack
of them, by keeping their
eyes directed at the ground
before their feet. They are

said to trudge when in fact their empty thoughts
unroll like a crimson carpet before their
gentle & delicate pace. In any street the pattern
of inheritance is laid down, the truth is for our
time in cats-eyes, white markings, gravel
left from the last fall of snow. We proceed
down it in dreams, from house to house which
spill nothing on to the track, only light on the
edge of the garden. The way is of course speech
and a tectonic emplacement, as gradient it
moves easily, like a void

It is now at this
time the one presence
of fact, our maze
through which we
tread the shadow or
at mid-day pace

level beneath our own. And in whichever form
we are possessed the surface is sleep again and
we should be thankful. By whatever movement,
I share the anonymous gift, the connivance

in where to go as what I now find myself
to have in the hand. The nomad is perfect
but the pure motion which has no track is
utterly lost; even the Esquimaux look for sled
markings, though on meeting they may not speak.
The street that is the
sequence of man
is the light of his
most familiar need,
to love without being stopped for some im-
mediate bargain, to be warm and tired
without some impossible flame in the heart.
As I walked up the hill this evening and felt
the rise bend up gently against me I knew
that the void was gripped with concentration.
Not mine indeed but the sequence of fact,
the lives spread out, it is a very wild and
distant resort that keeps a man, wandering
at night, more or less in his place.

CHAPTER THREE

THE COMMON GAIN, REVERTED.

In the last chapter of this thesis, Prynne's poem, "Concerning Quality, Again", was shown to be concerned with man as he reveals himself to be precluded from pure knowledge, from apprehension of some metaphysical "other" which transcends the structures of a differential sign system. Though man might feel that there is something outside these systems, something utterly decisive, he may never attain it. When he seeks to articulate it it is as though he were reaching out into the void. Human nature, the poem would seem to have suggested, is defined by a sense of absence and incompletion. Man's very essence, his "Quality", may be construed as the product of a tension between the obviousness and enveloping nearness of a spatio-temporally defined existence, and the impalpability and infinite regress of some "other" transcendental dimension. A recognition of this tension amounts to an awareness of the central existential mystery of the human situation, an acknowledgement of that crucial interrelationship which exists between being and non-being, between the meanings which man constructs for his life and that state of nothingness which eludes all conceptualisation.

It is this existential paradox which the next poem I have chosen to discuss goes on to examine. "The Common Gain, Reverted"(87) may be interpreted as an exploration of the vital reciprocity between the states of being and non-being as they exist in dynamic tension. All the structures which define man's existence and keep it in place, the poem suggests, are somehow kept there by nullity or "void". "The Common Gain, Reverted" poses the enigmatic idea that it is dealing as much with the absence of presence as with the presence of absence.

The controlling metaphor of the poem, "the street", a "road running

between two lines of houses"(OED), succinctly images the interrelationship between existence and non-existence, "sequence" and "void", which this poem is concerned to discuss. In a street, the empty space of the road is given definition by the lines of houses which flank it, whilst the lines of houses are, in their turn, defined by the interjacent road. Houses and street, "sequence" and "void", are reciprocally ennabling and defining.

A journey down this street, as it comes to represent a progressive examination of the relationship between "sequence" and "void", images an exploration of man's existential nature. The poem may be read as a contemporary version of the traditional quest romance in which a journey and the events which characterise it become a metaphor for man's spiritual or moral development. The text resonates with words evoking this journey: "trudge", "pace", "proceed", "way", "tread", "wandering". However, as in many quest romances, the purpose of the journey may be seen to lie more in the process of travelling than in some finite goal. It is, the poem suggests, in the flux and fluidity of constant movement that understanding lies. "The Common Gain, Reverted" develops the ideas introduced in the last chapter of this thesis. It suggests that it is only through a process of movement, through a spreading and diffusion of the consciousness, that man may elude the fixities of Enlightenment rationalism and attain more nearly to an understanding of existence.

The poem opens:

> The street is a void in the sequence of man,
> as he sleeps by its side, in rows that house
> his dreams.

Essential to an understanding of these first lines and, indeed, to the poem as a whole, is the concept of "the sequence of man", the idea that human existence pertains to some "continuous or connected series"(OED), to some organizing structure or system.

In order to understand this it is illuminating to look back to the work of the Italian jurist, Giambattista Vico, who, in 1725, published *The New*

Science. The principle aim of this book was to present a scientific study of men and nations, to establish a physics of man. Vico proposed that primitive myths were far more than artless or implausible stories. Rather, he argued, they represented an attempt to impose graspable shape onto the generalised experience of ancient peoples. They formed a sophisticated way of encoding and presenting reality. That shape, Vico suggested, arises in the human mind itself and becomes the shape of the world that that mind perceives as "natural" or "true". Thus, in perceiving the world, man perceives without realising it the superimposed shape of his own mind. Entities can only be meaningful or true in so far as they find a place within that shape. Terence Hawkes succinctly summarises this:

> man constructs the myths, the social institutions, virtually the whole world as he perceives it, and in so doing he constructs himself. This making process involves the continual creation of recognisable and repeated forms which we can now term a process of *structuring*...an inherent permanent, and definitive human characteristic.[1]

It is this inherent process of "structuring" which, I would suggest, "The Common Gain, Reverted" alludes to in its representation of the "sequence of man".

The poem expresses this notion of "sequence" through its image of the rows of houses lining a street. The tectonic metaphor is particularly apt for, just as man constructs the houses within which he lives, so, Vico suggests, he also constructs the systems of meaning which inscribe his human existence. Human beings and societies are not fashioned after some pre-existent model or plan. Rather, the human situation is determined by social relations and systems of human institutions.

Vico's ideas divaricate radically from those of traditional philosophers. Although his work passed virtually unnoticed at the time, his physics of man may be considered retrospectively to have heralded the profound alterations of perspective which are now associated with Postmodernist modes of thought.

With the arrival of the twentieth century, the disestablishment of Enlightenment metanarratives and breakdown of ideas of communal reality meant that the world was no longer viewed as a multitude of independently existing entities whose nature might be clearly classified through a purely objective perception. The relationship between subject and object (rather than some quality or nature presumed to be inherent in the thing observed), became the primary focus of enquiry.

An exploration of the relationships which man constructs and then perceives between things constitutes the principle concern of the Structuralist theories which form the backbone of modern modes of thought. Structuralism, a radical movement developing during the sixties, arrived eventually at the view that meaning in every sphere of human activity is necessarily inscribed within closed systems, systems which are independent of the material world and whose elements are functional or significant only as they are related to other elements within that same system. As Terence Hawkes explains in his study: *Structuralism and Semiotics*:

> the nature of every element in any given situation has no significance by itself, and in fact is determined by its relationship to all the other elements involved in that situation.[2]

Though Structuralist thought may be applied to a wide range of intellectual disciplines, language, as it was explored by Saussure as a sign system essentially disjunct from the "real" world, came to be seen as the most characteristic of all systems of expression. All social and cultural life is governed by systems of signs, explained Saussure, but language is analagous in structure and organisation to any form of social behaviour, and hence becomes a master pattern, an example, for all branches of semiology.

Saussure's work is open to a variety of interpretations, and he himself did not directly refer to the concept of structure. However, Structuralism

may be seen as a realisation of the Saussurean dream of a general science of the synchronic sign system, that is of the sign system as it may be studied as a complete system at any given time. A structure may be viewed as the set of relationships between different elements in a system. To define any text as a structure is to see it, therefore, as a set of Saussurean signs in which both signifiers and signifieds are governed by a single complex system of relationships.

It is thus, I would propose, that the "sequence of man" presented in "Concerning Quality, Again", could be interpreted as a reference to the linguistic systems which (as the previous chapter of this thesis has suggested), inscribe human consciousness. These systems or "sequence[s]" may, indeed, be described as being "of man", for man is defined by a self consciousness co-extensive with language. He is circumscribed by language, or by systems which are analogous to those of language in that their individual elements have meaning only in so far as they are part of an overall structure, part of a "sequence", a "continuous or connected series of things"(OED).

However, "The Common Gain, Reverted" suggests that this "sequence" exists in interrelationship with something outside it, some "other" which transcends it. The poem represents this "other" as "void". It is the co-existence of these two things, of the "sequence" through which the mind constructs coherent meaning, and the meaningless nullity of the "void", which the poem is to explore.

"The Common Gain" of the poem's title may be interpreted as a reference to that gain or acquisition of shared meaning, that *sensus communis*, which may be possessed within the stable structures of a rationally ordered system. However, the poem is to question this Structuralist vision in which the closed totality of a structure implies the possibility of the existence of some single central meaning, some ultimate signification delimited by the deep structure itself. This "Common Gain", the title of the poem says, is "Reverted". It "return[s] to a former

condition", it is "revoke[d], recall[ed], annull[ed]"(OED). The holistic stability of structure disintegrates. The poem appears to recognise Postmodernist modes of thought in which constructed meaning dissolves away into a ceaseless play of signifiers, open ended and non-teleological.

Prynne acknowledges that there is a "void" in the "sequence of man", and man, he suggests, comes closest to an apprehension of this void, this "otherness" which transcends language, when he "sleeps", when he assumes an "unconscious state or condition"(OED): "he sleeps by its side". A state of unconsciousness may only be defined through its radical otherness to that which the conscious mind may apprehend. Man is obliged to assume its existence, Freud explains, though he can know nothing of it. Completely indifferent to constructed meaning its psychical processes know neither logic nor negation, neither causality nor contradiction. It is thus that the text would seem to suggest that it is in a state which eludes all structure, which escapes the chains of sequency, of logic and rational progression, that man may approach an apprehension of "void", may rest "at its side", at that interface where utter meaninginglessness borders against the constructs of the conscious mind.

In sleep, however, man does not acquire a pure knowledge of "void". Man sleeps: "in rows that house / his dreams". Although, as Freudian theory explains, dreams form the principal access to the unconscious, they do not constitute a direct expression or reproduction of it. Rather, a dream may be seen as the outcome of an intensive transformation of what Freud terms a "latent content". Processes of production and transformation shape and construct the unconscious in order that it may be represented within the symbolic realm of consciousness. A dream, therefore, as it expresses itself within this realm, is "house[d]" "in rows". It is inscribed within a symbolic sign system, where a row, as it may be defined as "a (written or printed) line", or the "letters of the alphabet"(OED), would seem specifically to evoke the linear sequences of language. These language systems somehow constrict man's "dreams". They "house" them, "enclose [them] as in a

house"(OED). The connotations of constraint and confinement are reinforced by the rigidity of the iambic metre.

Man's existence, the poem goes on to affirm, is inscribed within the rational structures of consciousness: "Where he lives, which is the / light from windows". Light, Cirlot writes in his work on symbolism, is traditionally equated with the spirit. Its whiteness represents a "synthesis of the All"(187), an amalgamation which would amount to unity, to some absolute state transcending any concept of structure in so far as the latter functions expressly through the divisions and distinctions of differential relationships. The light which "The Common Gain, Reverted" now talks about, however, is not this transcendental radiance. It is the "light from windows", where a window, Cirlot explains, is "symbolic of consciousness", and because it is square in shape bears implications that are "rational and terrestrial"(373). The poem implies that the only knowledge man may apprehend, the only meaning his intellect may grasp, is that which may be defined and delimited by conscious rationality. Man may apprehend only some constructed notion of "void" in so far as the image of the window evokes that architectural idea of void as a "space left in a wall for a window"(OED).

There is a tone of wonder implicit in the next lines of the poem: "all the Victorian grandeur / of steam from a kitchen range". This wonder perhaps deliberately echoes that traditionally expressed by the Romantic poets at moments of epiphanic vision, at moments when they stood awestruck before the grandeur, the "transcendent greatness"(OED), of creation. However, in "The Common Gain, Reverted", it is suggested that the human mind is precluded from an apprehension of such transcendence. The tone of awe is reserved instead for a grandeur which is merely a "splendour of appearance"(OED). The narrative voice wonders not at the metaphysical but at the physical, at the stolid materiality of a kitchen range, which, as it is described as "Victorian", is specifically associated with the temporal world, with the cultural history which defines human life. Man,

the poem implies, may only envision that which is consonant with the spatio-temporal world.

In contrast to the materiality of the steaming range, the notion of void cannot be explained. Metaphysical nothingness is not simply a demarcation within being, a kind of thing which may be conceptualised through the articulations of language. It may only be encountered at the boundary of being, at the edge of consciousness. It is this boundary or "surface" which the poem goes on to explore:

> The street
> is a void, its surface slips, shines and is
> marked with nameless thoughts.

Just as man loses his foothold on the slippery surface of a street, so, within the metaphorical context of this poem, man loses his rational grip on the surface of the "void", on that interface where form and formless somehow commingle. It "slips", where to slip, to "go lightly or quietly"(OED), suggests that it eludes the vocalisations of speech, and hence "slips" in the sense that it "escapes *from* the mind"(OED).

The emphasis is on movement and the moment of change. The "surface" of the street is like that of a Cubist painting perhaps, in which a constant tension exists, a resonation between forms as they emerge from the background, and forms as they dissolve back into it. It is this surface, the poem says, which "shines". The image of the glittering street contrasts with the earlier image of "light from windows". The text, instead of evoking the fixities of constructed form, excites an idea of shimmering, shifting motility; an elusive fluidity emphasised by the onomatopoeic sibilance of "surface", "slips", and "shines". Structure and solidity seem to dissolve into the reflected glitter of dancing light. The idea resonates with that expressed earlier in "The Western Gate", where Prynne describes the road which:

lies on the
seam of the earth, with that partly
turning & falling metaphysic.
(48)

Furthermore, where "The Western Gate" says of the "wet pavement" and the camber of the road as it "slips into" the rain, that "the lines are taut with / strain", so now too, in "The Common Gain, Reverted", the speaker seems to see in the slippery sheen of the street's surface, a similar tension, a taut resonance between that which has form and outline and that which eludes all structure.

The surface of the street evades the systematic thought which would seek to define it. Man cannot be conscious of the "void". The symbolic sign system which defines his mind may only "mark" it by describing that which it is not. Man may only apprehend that which transcends him in terms of its absence. The thirteenth century mystic, Meister Eckhart, recognised this. In writing of the nature of Divine Being he gestured towards the transcendental in negative terms, describing Godhead as "a not-God, a not-spirit, a not-Person, a not-image".[3] "The Common Gain, Reverted", similarly suggests that "void" may only be negatively conceptualised. The surface of the street is "marked with nameless thoughts", it says, thoughts which lie outside the definitions of a linguistic sign system.

"If we could / level down into the street!" the speaker exclaims. He envisions some sort of dissolution of boundaries. For man to "level down", to raise to the ground his constructed "sequences", would be for him to slip free of rules and confinement. It would be for him to venture beyond the rational orderings which enable distinctions between contraries and opposites to be made, and thus to approach some state of synthesis eluding all notions of differentiation. It would be for man to coincide with that interface where "sequence" and "void", being and non-being, commingle. In apprehending such a synthesis, man would no longer need to seek existential understanding. The momentary finality indicated by the

exclamation mark suggests that levelled with the surface of the street he might somehow achieve the goal of his quest, might attain that finality or completion which, in the context of this poem, would amount to an apprehension, an experiencing, of essential human nature.

In this levelled state man's existence would be "spread" out, expanded beyond the narrowing sequences, the "rows" that inscribe the conscious mind:

> Run across by
> the morning traffic, spread like shadows, the
> commingling of thoughts which the defeat we
> cannot love.

A shadow, as de Vries explains, is symbolic of that which is "neither body, nor soul, but something in between"(417). It represents that state of resonance between being and non-being, between conscious thought and the "defeat" which would negate all consciousnesss. It is this "commingling", the poem suggests, which man should aspire towards in his quest for ontological understanding. He should seek some state of dynamic tension between form and formlessness rather than an absolute dissolution into "void" for, as the poem explains, "we cannot love" defeat. The primary structure of human consciousness, its fundamental starting point, is that it demands an object. Yet the "void", the "defeat" which is the negation of existence, is not an object in this sense, it may not be demarcated within the structures which predicate consciousness. For man to fully apprehend "void", for him to completely coincide with it, would be for him to cease to exist.

In suggesting that man should aspire to "level down into the street", "The Common Gain, Reverted" aims a blow at the holistic certainties of Structuralist thought. A structure, as it presumes a centre, a fixed principle, a hierarchy of meanings and a solid foundation, still holds out hope for some essence, some single, central meaning which man might understand as an expression of the outer reality which informs it. The notion of some

deep structure, some fundamental meaning which may be excavated, is the last defence of universal system and logically deducible depth-surface relationship. It is just these notions which the poem now questions. In acknowledging "void", that which eludes all structured definition, it aims a blow at the constructedness of human meaning, turning instead towards Poststructuralist modes of thought, towards the Derridean ideas which, refusing logocentric notions, propose language to function as an endless deferral of meaning in which there can never be any final element, any fundamental unit which escapes the ceaseless interplay of linguistic deferral and difference.

The only way that man may approach an understanding of his existence, the poem suggests, is through the breakdown of recognised and sanctioned form. It is through a movement towards a fluidity which inverts these forms, collapsing them into a diffuse plurality whose absence of ultimate meaning would somehow negotiate "void", spreading consciousness beyond the delimiting structures of orthodox philosophies. Consciousness is no longer seen as an agent of action, manipulating the world through a series of dualisms generated by the subject-object split. It is cast adrift, dispersed and diffused. No longer able to anchor itself to any structure of truth or reason, it is seen instead as a decentred function through which impersonal forces pass and intersect. It is "Run across by / the morning traffic".

This image of the diffusion of self into some nameless realm of "otherness", resonates throughout Prynne's poems. In "If There is a Stationmaster at Stamford S.D. Hardly So", he suggests that the "whole power" of man would lie in the "dispersion" into the "level sky / of each pulse", the "sliding"(45) of self-conscious individuality into an infinity which eludes all form and boundary. Similarly, in "Thoughts on the Estérhazy Court Uniform", the speaker yearns that music, as it most nearly reminds him of that "home" he "may not / have"(99), should "level out into some complete migration of / sound"(98), for if this should happen,

the poem implies, man might "leave unnoticed" for some transcendental realm "free of displace- / ment"(98), free of a symbolic system which marks only the absence, the displacement, of that which it represents.

"The Common Gain, Reverted" explores these ideas through the image of the pilgrim or traveller who, as he journeys towards his goal, traditionally represents man as he moves onwards towards an understanding of life.

> Those who walk heavily
> carry their needs, or lack
> of them, by keeping their
> eyes directed at the ground
> before their feet.

Literally, the "needs" referred to in these lines are the possessions of the pilgrim, the things which he will want on his journey. He walks "heavily" because he carries all that he owns, or rather, the poem qualifies itself, "lack" of what he owns, since in comparison to those in the houses which line the street the pilgrim presumably has very little.

In the metaphorical context of this poem, "needs" may be interpreted as a reference to those desires which characterise human consciousness as it is necessarily co-extensive with a symbolic sign system in which meaning may never be fully or immediately present. The sign marks only the absence of that which it purports to represent. Man may never reach that satisfaction, that ultimate attainment of a full and present signification, which would amount to the negation of "need". It is in accordance with this idea that the poem goes on to suggest that men who have few "needs", who can "carry" or bear their needs, are those who are aware of the "void" as it directs and underpins their lives, and thus more nearly attain that diffuse state of being in which they approach ontological understanding.

Such men bear their needs by "keeping their / eyes directed at the ground", at that interface where "sequence" and "void" commingle. In Prynne's "A Gold Ring Called Reluctance", where the ground is described

as being "interesting" in so far as it seems to represent "the grave maybe, / that area which claims its place like / a shoe"(21), the concepts of death and non-being are presented as essential to existence. Indeed, as the poem goes on to explain: "the dead are a necessity to us...The end is a carpet on / which we walk"(23). It is the possibility of "void", of that which lies beyond existence, which necessarily conditions man's quest for ontological understanding.

As "The Common Gain, Reverted" goes on, its imagery resonates with that of this earlier poem:

> They are
> said to trudge when in fact their empty thoughts
> unroll like a crimson carpet before their
> gentle & delicate pace.

These lines once again point out the inadequacies of constructed meaning. What they "are / said" to do, how they are described within language, does not accurately reflect their actual state. To trudge is to "walk laboriously, wearily, or without spirit"(OED). However, "in fact" the pilgrims have a "gentle & delicate pace". The softness of the affricate and the light alveolar stops of "gentle" and "delicate", coupled with the whispered, bilabial plosive and voiceless fricative of "pace", onomatopoeically evoke a lightness of movement contrasting markedly with the monosyllabic "trudge". There is a sense of ethereality reinforcing the suggestion that the traveller or pilgrim does do not walk "without spirit" but, on the contrary, seems in walking to gain an awareness of some metaphysical or spiritual space. Indeed, the poem has already said that these travellers direct their eyes towards the ground, and the act of seeing is, Cirlot writes, representative of a "spiritual act"(99).

Man, the poem suggests, will only reach ontological understanding by apprehending that interface where that which is "empty", that absent formless abstract which lies beyond the organisations of human consciousness, dissolves the contour and structure of "thought" so that the

two may commingle. Such "empty thoughts" the poem says, "unroll like a crimson carpet", like a symbol of honour before man. His "gentle and delicate" pace introduces the Sartrean notion of fragility. Fragility, writes Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, only "enters into...being on the appearance of the permanent possibility of non-being".[4] Ontological understanding lies in a process of constant flowing movement, of ceaseless flux and reflux negotiating both being and non-being, meaning and non-meaning. Indeed, as Prynne writes in "Frost and Snow, Falling": "the pilgrim is again quality...The wanderer with his / thick staff...is our only rival"(70-71). The process of continual movement, of endless journeying, not only precedes the attainment of any goal which man has set himself, but in some sense would seem to equal this goal in dignity and meaning.

However, human consciousness is predicated by symbolic structures. A journey towards understanding is necessarily shaped within them:

> In any street the pattern
> of inheritance is laid down, the truth is for our
> time in cats-eyes, white markings, gravel
> left from the last fall of snow.

In entering into consciousness, man necessarily enters into a symbolic order which pre-exists him, into a "pattern" already in place, waiting to assign him his position within it. As Prynne writes in "In Cimmerian Darkness": "We dip into the ready world / which waits for us"(73). Language always pre-exists the individual subject as the very realm in which he or she unfolds. The only meaning or "truth" which man can apprehend, is that which may be inscribed within the linguistic system. It is that which lies, "The Common Gain, Reverted" suggests, in "cat's eyes", "white markings" and "gravel", all of which manifestly belong to the realm of the symbolic and representational. They signify, not by virtue of any inherent quality, but only as they function contextually within a system. Their meaning is relational, not substantial.

The poem, in recognising this notion of temporal "truth", evades a

certain trend of Postmodernist criticism. It evades the relentlessly deconstructive principles of those types of academicism which are concerned only to lay bare the illusoriness of all signification. Though Prynne's poem acknowledges all meaning to be essentially undecidable, nonetheless, in presenting language as something indissociably woven with man's practical everyday existence, with his journey through life, it reinstates some sort of decidability. It restores some force to notions such as "truth" through its recognition of that which the quotidian self, the every day consciousness, might count as "truth".

Whilst acknowledging human understanding to be inevitably delimited by language, the poem nevertheless asserts that for man to explore more closely his central existential mystery, for him to "proceed" further in his journey down the street, he must free himself as far as possible from the rigid sequences of a rational consciousness.

> We proceed
> down it in dreams, from house to house which
> spill nothing onto the track, only light on the
> edge of the garden.

In his work on the interpretation of dreams, Freud noted that what was peculiar to dreams was not a hidden meaning but a peculiar movement, process, or syntax. Jaques Lacan's work may be seen as a Poststructuralist re-interpretation and critique of classical Freudianism. Lacan explains that dreams work in the same way as language. They are composed less of signs, of closed entities with a definite meaning, than of signifiers which can never be nailed to a single idea. In dreams, as in Postmodernist views of language, there is a continual flickering, spilling and defusing of meaning. There is a fluidity of movement which resists the containment of "sequence", of "following as a logical inference or as a necessary result"(OED). In dreams, Lacan explains, the signified slides beneath the signifier. Meaning escapes the categories of structured systems. Eluding rational and narrative orderings, dreams represent a shift away from the

view of existence as a closed entity, classifiable and analysable, and towards a recognition of the irreducible plurality of man, of the shimmering webs of undecidability weaving a mind incapable of ever inscribing any single centre, essence or meaning.

Dreams, the symbolic fulfilments of the unconscious, may thus be seen to negotiate the interface between the fixities of structure and that which eludes all structuration, between consciousness and that radical "otherness", that "void" of the unconscious. It is through dreams that man may more nearly understand the nature of his existence as it is essentially conditioned and held in place by non-existence. Through dreams man may "proceed" down the street. Indeed, as Prynne writes in "Chemins de Fer": "the dream slides right up to the / true Adam"(120-121), to man as he really is.

The rows of houses, as they represent the structured systems of consciousness, appear in contrast to be fixed and rigid. They "spill nothing". Incapable of apprehending the "void", consciousness may only apprehend its boundaries. The houses throw "light on the / edge of the garden". It is only through a process of binary opposition, the poem suggests, that the rational mind may apprehend that "other" adjacent to the "edge", that "void" beyond the "garden", where a garden, Cirlot explains, as a place where nature is "subdued, ordered, selected and enclosed"(115), is commonly used as a symbol of the conscious as opposed to the unconscious mind.

This consciousness is the only "way" available to man: "The way is of course speech / and a tectonic emplacement". Speech may be seen as the phonemic principle which activates the structural system. This "speech", as it forms a "way", a "track prepared or available for travelling along"(OED), pre-exists man and moulds his path. The use of the definite article emphasises the fact that "speech" is not one among many paths but **the** only path, the only course or line along which men may travel.

There is an implicit sense of inescapability in the noun, "emplacement". To be human is to be inevitably placed within the

constructions of a symbolic sign system. Furthermore, where the adjective, "tectonic", may be defined as: "[b]elonging to the actual structure of the earth's crust"(OED), the poem reasserts that man, as an earthly creature, may never attain to an understanding of the transcendent, of that "void" which lies beyond terrestrial structures. Rather he can only ask about that which he is constrained to suppose is "truth" with reference to the systems which organise his mind. Meaning just is the way it is revealed to be through the structures of consciousness. Man cannot intelligibly raise questions about existence save as it is given to him, for consciousness's limits are just the limits of intelligibility.

Man's "tectonic emplacement" removes him from that level surface where he might have apprehended "otherness". The poem says of speech that: "as gradient it / moves easily, like a void". The adverb suggests that man, accustomed to his "emplacement" within a structured system, perceives no constraint within it. He feels no limitations. Language seems to move as "easily", as "smoothly [and] freely"(OED) as the "void".

This idea is developed in the next lines of the poem. The sentence is not completed by a full stop so that the simile, "like a void", could equally be taken to formulate a part of the subsequent sentence. In this case the poem would appear to suggest that the concept of "void", of that which eludes all structures, must be in some way structured in order for man to conceive of it. It is only through man's presence, through his consciousness, that he can conjecture absence:

> like a void
> It is now at this
> time the one presence
> of fact.

Interpreting these lines as one sentence they would seem to suggest that that absence which is "void" becomes, paradoxically, a "presence / of fact". It is only against the notion of "void" that the structures of consciousness, essentially predicated by difference and binary opposition,

may define themselves. The poem implies that there is a possibility of knowing what is not the case, knowing what might be termed a negative fact, and this is as much a piece of knowledge as any other.

Speech, the phonemic principle activating the structural systems which circumscribe all knowledge, is thus seen to be:

> now at this
> time the one presence
> of fact, our maze
> through which we
> tread the shadow or
> at mid-day pace
> level beneath our own.

The only truths of which man may be conscious are those of "fact", of "truth[s] known by actual observation...as opposed to what is merely inferred"(OED). In "our time", in man's spatio-temporal world, truth is that which man himself has made. This establishes the principle of *verum factum*, the idea, as Terence Hawkes explains it, that:

> that which man recognises as true (*verum*) and that which he himself has made (*factum*) are one and the same. When man perceives the world, he perceives without knowing it the superimposed shape of his own mind, and entities can only be meaningful (or "true") in so far as they find a place within that shape.[5]

In his poem, "A New Tax On the Counter Earth", Prynne specifically explores this principle of *verum factum*. "Truth", the poem explains, is not absolute, but "endlessly local":

> what
> was said to be true was so
> because said ur-
> gently - and when imitated by
> lazy charade the truth became optional, al-
> ternative to the grand stability of
> dream: "the transit from drive organisation
> to cognitive process." (172)

"The Common Gain, Reverted" similarly recognises that for man, inscribed within symbolic sign systems, the only notion of "truth" may be that which is manufactured in accordance with these systems. Linguistic structures are described as a "maze", a "network of winding and intercommunicating paths"(OED). Trapped within this network men may never "spread like shadows" in order to attain an understanding of being as it defines itself against non-being. Rather, they may only "tread" their shadows, they may only "follow or pursue"(OED) them. Even at midday, the time of greatest illumination or understanding, man may never merge with his shadow. Although "level beneath" him it may seem to be almost at one with him, it nonetheless (as the use of the possesive adjective implies), remains distinct. Language is thus represented as a "maze" in the sense that it is a "deception"(OED). It can never inscribe the "reality" of absolute presence. A sign is by its very nature a "deception". It is never real, in the sense that it may never inscribe any ultimate meaning.

The image of the maze evokes a sense of bewilderment and frustration. The poem offers "sleep", the suspension of consciousness, as a rest from this confusion:

> And in whichever form
> we are possessed the surface is sleep again and
> we should be thankful.

Sleep, in negotiating the interface between "sequence" and "void", eases the rigidity of the structures which "possess" or dominate human consciousness. There is a tone of simple gratitude in the phrase: "we should be thankful". Furthermore, the adjective, as it evokes its obsolete sense of "satisfied, content"(OED), suggests that in sleep man might somehow satisfy his needs in so far as it is in sleep that he understands more closely the nature of existence.

The poem goes on:

By whatever movement,
I share the anonymous gift, the connivance
in where to go as what I now find myself
to have in the hand.

These lines suggest that through a drifting fluidity of mind, man might take part in that which escapes all fixity, that "gift" which, being "anonymous", having no name, is indefinable within the structures of language. Indeed, a "gift", as something which is bestowed upon another "without the expectation or receipt of an equivalent"(OED), would seem to evoke that which escapes the representational equivalences of symbolic systems. Movement, the poem suggests, negotiates both that which can be consciously grasped and that which eludes all form. In motion there is a "connivance", a "covert understanding" (OED), between form and the formless. The idea reflects the Derridean theory of *différance*, the Postmodernist notion that the function or meaning of any element in a text is never fully present, but is rather the product of a motion, a chain of signification, open-ended and non-teleological. Language is structured as an endless deferral of meaning. In the same way, the poem implies, man's quest for ontological understanding will be more nearly satisfied if he recognises that his existence, as it is essentially shaped within language, is neither a fixed structure nor a total freedom, but a movement guided by a dynamic tension between "sequence" and "void", between a sense of the present which one has "in the hand" and a never to be achieved future, an endlessly deferred "where to go".

Through a drifting decentralisation of consciousness man may "spread" beyond the narrowing sequences of logical and rational conceptualisation towards an experiencing of existence. As Prynne writes in his earlier poem, "Die a Millionaire": "true expansion / is probably drift"(14). He uses the "nomadic" race of the Scythians to exemplify this diffusion and extension of the self, representing them as they "slipped sideways" across the boundary from China to Russia, in the same way as he suggests, man should slip freely across the categories of rational thought.

The idea is echoed in "The Common Gain, Reverted". "The nomad is perfect", the poem goes on to say. A "nomad", "one who leads a roaming or wandering life"(OED), leads that fluid existence which negotiates both form and the formless. Through this "movement" man receives (as the previous sentence of the poem suggested), the "anonymous gift", the attainment of which would make him "perfect" in the sense that it makes him "complete"(OED). The "needs" or desires engendered by man's positioning within a symbolic sign system are in some way satisfied by a drifting movement which, in partially escaping the categories of sequential structure, negotiates "void". It apprehends that state of non-being which somehow conditions all man's questions about being and thus approaches towards some completeness or wholeness of understanding. Indeed, as Prynne writes in his earlier poem, "The Numbers", it is when we move "without even a shred of desire / like maps at our feet"(11) that:

> there will be the
> new wandering
> star, in
> the heavens, the
> state of our own
> coherence. (12)

"The Common Gain, Reverted", however, moves on to reassert that the mind can never attain such purity. "The nomad is perfect", the poem says,

> but the pure motion which has no track is
> utterly lost; even the Esquimaux look for sled
> markings, though on meeting they may not speak.

Purity, that absolute state which, as it admits of no division, makes "no tracks", no "marks"(OED) by which it might define itself against other, is subsumed in "void". It is "utterly lost" from the "way", from the structures of language, and hence from human comprehension. Consciousness is necessarily the result of the division or articulation of signs. Human nature is defined within a differential system. Even the nomadic Esquimaux, who

in the context of this poem might be taken to exemplify a "perfect" existence, living their drifting lives far from the "rows that house [men's] dreams", roaming snowy wastes where tracks are inevitably evanescent, nonetheless need some basic structure. They "look for sled marks". Even if on meeting they may choose not to speak, not to communicate within the delimitations of a mutually coherent system, they nonetheless need the innate structures of the mind by which consciousness, in defining itself against other, defines its very existence. Indeed, as Prynne writes in "Frost and Snow, Falling": "Even / in this modern age we leave tracks, as we / go"(70). Even in a world concerned to disturb and erase foundationalist philosophies, man needs some sort of structure to register existence. "[W]e too are numbered like / prints in the new snow"(168), Prynne explains in "Es Lebe Der König".

Having once again acknowledged man's necessary inscription within a symbolic system, "The Common Gain, Reverted" goes on to explore the sense in which the metaphorical "street" which provides the course of human existence is an essential resonation between form and the formless:

> The street that is the
> sequence of man
> is the light of his
> most familiar need,
> to love without being stopped for some im-
> mediate bargain, to be warm and tired
> without some impossible flame in the heart.

The poem has subtly shifted away from its representation of the "street" as the empty space of the road, towards a recognition of the street as the "road together with the adjacent houses"(OED). There has been a move towards a deconstruction of the binary antitheses which characterise Structuralist views of language. It would appear that the empty space of the road is no longer defined in diametric opposition to the rows of houses. "Void" is no longer seen simply as a non-structure, assigned a chiefly negative value in relation to "sequence". Instead sequence is recognised to

be what it is by virtue of ceaselessly shutting out this "void", by defining itself in antithesis to it. The whole essence of structure is therefore caught up and put at risk in the very gesture by which it seeks to assert an autonomous existence. Void is not just an "otherness" transcending all comprehension. Rather, it appears as an "other" intimately related to "sequence" in that, as an image of what sequence is not, it is also essentially a reminder of what it is. Sequence needs this void, even as it spurns it. It is parasitically dependent upon it and upon the act of excluding and subordinating it. Perhaps, the poem suggests, the reason why such exclusion was necessary is that void is not quite so "other" after all. What is outside is recognised to be also inside, what is alien is, in some way, intimate.

In acknowledging this man is illuminated. This recognition is, the poem implies, the "light of his / most familiar need", of that consciousness which predicates his existence. Love is not, so to speak, a pure state. Man cannot simply love. He must always love something or someone. To love is necessarily to distinguish oneself from another, and hence to be conscious. In contrast the notion of a "bargain" which is "immediate", which "has no intermediary or intervening member"(OED), would seem to gesture towards that state of unity which refuses differentiation. Man would be "stopped" by this bargain for, in refusing notions of distinction it would refuse the state of consciousness which such distinctions predicate. Refusing human existence this bargain would, therefore, amount to that "defeat we / cannot love" alluded to earlier in the poem.

Similarly, man does not want an "impossible flame" in his heart, where a flame, Cirlot writes, is symbolic of "transcendence itself"(108). It is "impossible" in the sense that it "cannot exist or come into being". The heart, the organ traditionally associated with love, cannot apprehend such transcendence. Though love may arise out of a desire for union it is not an "impossible" desire for perfect unity which man seeks, not that absolute synthesis which would venture beyond the differential structures of human

consciousness. Man's "most familiar need" is to be, not in an absolute, but in an intermediate, state. This state is represented here by the warmth which negotiates between the binary opposites, hot and cold. In the context of this poem the notion of warmth seems to evoke that diffusion of consciousness through which the mind expands beyond the dualisms of rational subjectivity. It is through this diffusion that man may apprehend the unconscious, may attain that "knowledge / of the unseen"(53) which Prynne describes in his earlier "Moon Poem" as "a warmth which spreads into / the level ceremony of diffusion"(53).

"The Common Gain, Reverted" draws towards its close:

> As I walked up the hill this evening and felt
> the rise bend up gently against me I knew
> that the void was gripped with concentration.

The "hill" or "rise" would seem to metaphorise that "gradient" of speech alluded to earlier in the poem, that slope which eased man away from the level of the street, from the interface where form and the formless commingle. To feel this "rise", however "gently", suggests that man is conscious of the structures of speech. He defines himself against them, feeling them as other than him. This in turn implies that man might somehow become conscious of that which lies outside these structures. It is with this realisation that the speaker of the poem goes on to say: "I knew / that the void was gripped with concentration".

The noun "concentration" is defined as the "keeping of the mental faculties fixed on one object"(OED). It evokes the fixities of "tectonic emplacement" as they are contrasted in this poem with the drifting plurality of that interface where structure dissolves into void. Concentration prevents this diffusion. It resists the fluidity of the deconstructive thought which seeks to undermine the binary oppositions by which the notion of "void" is firmly held in its place. "|C|oncentration" puns, perhaps, on its other meaning of to "condense or reduce in compass or volume"(OED). The rigid structures of the conscious mind, in gripping the void, concentrate

and congeal it so that it may be controlled and given form.

Alone, the individual cannot loosen these structures. The "concentration", says the speaker, is: "Not mine indeed but the sequence of fact, / the lives spread out". The individual is not regarded as the source or end of meaning. Rather, meaning is a question of relationship within the structure, the network of "lives spread out". An individual is reduced to a mere function within an impersonal system, and it is this system, this "sequence of fact" in which he is positioned, which is the subject and the source of meaning.

Man, the poem concludes, can never achieve absolute truth. He can recognise only that an understanding of human ontology lies in a process of drifting movement:

> it is a very wild and
> distant resort which keeps a man, wandering
> at night, more or less in his place.

A "resort", as a "means or way of escape"(OED), perhaps evokes the ultimate resort of death, that absolute state of non-being. Language may never inscribe this absolute. It can only gesture towards it with the superlative phrase: "very wild and distant", which encourages the mind to extrapolate its ideas towards that which extends beyond the limitations of language. As "wild" the resort is "uncultivated, uninhabited"(OED). It is free of the fixed structures of man. It is a "waste" or "desert"(OED) such as a nomad might move across. It is also "distant", "separate or apart in space", suggesting, perhaps, that it lies beyond the structured systems of language.

The poem concludes, however, that it is only as man may be seen as existing in interrelationship with this "very wild and / distant resort" that his human nature may be defined. It is only thus that he is kept "more or less in his place". The adverbial phrase, "more or less", is deliberately vague. Man's nature may not be precisely described for his essence is "wandering". It is characterised by that fluid, drifting motion which, the

poem has suggested, arises from a dynamic tension between that which has form and shape and that which is utterly formless.

In the metaphorical context of this poem the verb, "wandering", puns on its homonym "wondering". As Hulme notes in his *Speculations*: "Wonder can only be the attitude of a man passing from one stage to another, it can never be a permanently fixed thing".[6] Wondering may thus be seen as a wandering movement of the mind. Coleridge writes that, "in Wonder all Philosophy began".[7] "The Common Gain, Reverted" may, therefore, be interpreted as a poem which moves towards the recognition of that Heideggerean philosophy in which the font of genuine thought is seen to be astonishment or wonder. It is seen to be an astonishment at, and before, being. The poem replaces the Romantic concept of wonder, of awe before the transcendent, with a marvelling at the very processes of man's temporal existence. It is astonishment at the human situation, the poem would seem to suggest, that sets man on the path to questioning what it is that is, what it is that indwells in all extant things, what it is which constitutes beingness as oppose to non-beingness. Wonder, the amazement and astonishment of man at his own existence, is presented as that "perfect" motion of the mind by which man most nearly apprehends the central existential mystery of his life.

An unfolding of this wonder, a tracing of man's wandering progress down the street, is a careful translation of astonishment into the action of questioning. Man, in questioning, is moving, and, as the speaker of the poem has said, by "whatever movement, / I share the anonymous gift". Through the questioning of his existence man approaches ontological understanding. Even if he may never attain an ultimate resolution, an absolute answer to resolve his dilemmas, his journey is nonetheless not aimless. The wandering of wondering, the peregrination towards that which is worthy of being questioned, is not adventure but homecoming. Man, as he walks up the hill in the evening, comes home to the unanswerable, to the fact that he is a being for whom being is necessarily in question.

1. Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism & Semiotics* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1977), p14.
2. Ibid., p.18.
3. Meister Eckhart, "Sermon XCIX", in F.C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*, revised edition (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), p.274.
4. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1957), p.8.
5. Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, p.13.
6. T.E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism", in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1924), p.140.
7. Quoted by George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London, Fontana Press, 1978), p.37.

FIRE LIZARD
(1970)

Come and tell me. The draw
of the beetle, making the lane
of water, the fire lizard.
I hear the front of your
visited wish, I am
inside it now.

I hear where you go to. My
love of the corners. If your
scarf is a deeper blue, come
past the bridle,
the bodiless parterre
shakes the sleeve. There
I believe what you say.

Oh small lamp of the
scarlet, tell me: the front
rests by the sky. We too
seek perfect pitch.
Cracking nuts, leaning
either way you say so.

Bright shadows point
under the snow. The
intelligence is not even
held under. The new
thing cries like a cat.
Shew me sweet with
the fingers

for that's enough.
The proem strides off
as breakfast by the
plate washed over;
oiling the shell,
ringing the bell.

I cannot part you, try
as I often do. The hour
snaps up my tinder bank
and where will be
the last of her
time to go with it;
which is the step.

As you say so he
takes his flit, over
the water creamy
toes, envy with coins
right by the phone box.
We are the recession
of blue-green.

The broken dangerous cup
is not mended.
The point of sky has
all that in sight but
optics apart. Parsecs
fiddle the onion,
don't you know?

Or care what the cave
says, who said it.
Burning the gum while
the bird made solemn mock.
He says balsam in
defence, warningly on.

Are you hurt now,
scalded anywhere on
the arm. I take your
part my Russian winter,
ice on the stream. On
the formal disclaimer.

that's so too. Banded opal
in the mouth of June, why
not. I know why. The fish
delays, that's why, scale
rattles over the crossing.

Still I love you.
That's the reason too.

CHAPTER FOUR

FIRE LIZARD

"Concerning Quality, Again" and "The Common Gain, Reverted" have suggested that traditional rationalist and empiricist methodologies are inadequate to the expression of the human situation. Man's ontological nature, these poems have seemed to imply, remains essentially resistant to analytic conceptualisation. The conventional orderings of conscious thought resist that diffusion of subjectivity, that dissolution of classical distinction between subject and object, which would lead to an experiencing of human existence as it arises as the product of a dynamic tension between the structures which define man's life and some "other" realm, some "void" or state of pure transcendence, which lies beyond it.

"The Common Gain, Reverted" suggests that man approaches such a dissolution of subjective boundaries through dreams, in so far as dreams, in their refusal of rational and narrative structure, negotiate the subconscious regions of the mind. As symbolic fulfilments of the unconscious, they represent some paradoxical commingling of structure and void, some enigmatical relationship between form and the formless, which reflects the fundamental existential dilemmas of human existence.

It is the possibility of just such an interrelationship which Prynne's work, *Fire Lizard*, now goes on to explore. In examining the relationship between two people, between a lover and his beloved, it examines by analogy the interconnection between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind, between the structures of language and that void which lies beyond them. The dialectic is both literal and

symbolic in that the poem dramatises both a literal interrelationship between two lovers, a man and a woman, and also a symbolic interrelationship between what are commonly seen as the masculine and feminine aspects of one mind. It is thus, I would argue, that the speaking voice of what I will presume to be the male lover, comes to represent the articulations of the patriarchal value system which dominates Western traditions of philosophy, whilst the female beloved with whom he seeks communication becomes, in turn, a symbol of the feminine energies, the decentered and indefinable diffusion of consciousness, which such patriarchal value systems have sought to repress.

As the last chapter of this thesis suggested, a series of conceptual oppositions are conventionally seen to structure Western philosophical thought. The French feminist, Hélène Cixous, has analysed this idea. In her book, *The Newly Born Woman*, she cites a series of typical conceptual dualisms:

Activity/Passivity
Sun/Moon
Culture/Nature
Day/Night
Father/Mother
Head/Heart
Intelligible/Palpable
Logos/Pathos.[1]

Each of these dualisms, as it corresponds to the fundamental antithesis: masculine/feminine, is heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system which interprets it in such a way that the feminine side is always construed to be the negative, powerless instance. Western traditions of thought, Cixous says, are caught up in an endless series of hierarchical antitheses, based upon the underlying masculine/feminine opposition with its inevitable positive/negative paradigm. For one of the terms to acquire meaning it must destroy the other. As Toril Moi explains:

> The "couple" cannot be left intact: it becomes a general battlefield where the struggle for signifying supremacy is forever re-enacted. In the end victory is equated with activity and defeat with passivity; under patriarchy, the male is always the victor.[2]

It is this patriarchal power over language that Dale Spender recognises when she talks of "man-made" language:

> The English language has been literally man made and...it is still primarily under male control...This monopoly over language is one of the means by which males have ensured their own primacy, and consequently have ensured the invisibility or "other" nature of females, and this primacy is perpetuated while women continue to use, unchanged, the language which they have inherited.[3]

Against such systems of binary thought, Cixous posits the ideas of the Postmodernist critic Jaques Derrida. Derrida proposed language to be structured not through the static closure of conceptual oppositions, but rather through the free play of signs; through notions of multiple, heterogenous, *différance*. For Derrida, nothing may escape the ceaseless interplay of linguistic deferral and difference. His theories of language throw the field of signification wide open, breaking apart the manacles of patriarchal dualism, abandoning the traditional dichotomy between masculine and feminine views.

Texts which work on such Derridean notions of *différance* are, says Cixous, feminine texts. However, she goes on to explain, their practice "can never be theorized, enclosed, coded", for "it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination".[4] Indeed, Julia Kristeva writes: "I...understand by 'woman' that which cannot be represented, that which is not spoken, that which remains outside naming and ideologies".[5] Prynne alludes to this indefinable, feminine realm throughout the body of his work. In "Lashed to the Mast"(49), for instance, he writes of that "whole other /

image of man" which is "with no name & place"(50), whilst in "For This, For This"(71), he speaks of "some silent affair through which / we hear everything" yet which is "without / name"(72).

To reach towards this realm of "otherness", Prynne suggests in "A Figure of Mercy, of Speech", is to look into that "distance / that is unspoken"(39). It is to reach towards an apprehension of that space which eludes the language which would conceptualise it, which slips free of its handcuffs, of the binary oppositions which police patriarchal modes of thought. Indeed, as Prynne writes in "If There is a Stationmaster at Stamford S.D. Hardly So", the "parkland for / watered souls, the final / policeman's dream" would be that:

> the quanta of wish
> and desire, too, can be marched
> off to some goal so distant
> where in the hermitage
> of our last days the
> handcuffs would seem
> an entirely proper
> abstraction. (45)

Prynne seems to gesture towards a vision of feminine writing, a type of writing which, as Cixous characterises it, is:

> precisely working [in] the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death...[it wants] the two, as well as both, the ensemble of one and the other, not fixed in sequence of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another.[6]

It is this dynamic ambiguity, this "incessant process of exchange", which Prynne's *Fire Lizard* explores in its dramatisation of the relationship between the lover and his beloved as they come to represent the masculine and the feminine aspects of a mind. In struggling to

express the intercommunication between them, the poem struggles to express some paradoxical union of multiplicity, some enigmatical ensemble of "the two, as well as both". It strives to speak, perhaps, with the mysterious "beauty" of that "one voice containing the other"(132) described in Prynne's earlier poem "And Only Fortune Shines". *Fire Lizard* may be read as a development and exploration of ideas expressed in such earlier poems as "The Wound, Day and Night" in which the traditional opposition between masculine and feminine, between "Day" and "Night", is presented as a wound destroying the wholeness of man. To be "born back" into this wholeness, Prynne suggests, into "the plaintive chanting / under the Atlantic and the unison of forms", man must repress divisions. "It *may* all flow again if we suppress the / breaks" the poem says, if "we dissolve the bars"(63). The shoals of sand on a beach perhaps evoke those other divisive "bars" of Cixous's "prison house"[7] of patriarchal language. If these bars were to be dissolved, Prynne suggests in the "The Wound, Day and Night", man might be "born at long last into the image of love"(63). Male and female aspects of the mind might attain that wholeness of dynamic interrelationship which Prynne now explores through the image of the fire lizard.

A fire lizard provides an apt image for this dynamic relationship in so far as it evokes the salamander, a lizard like creature mythologically supposed to inhabit fire and hence, in the traditions of alchemy, considered to represent that element in which it lives. Alchemists retained a Heraclitean notion of fire, viewing it as an agent of transmutation. All things were thought to derive from and return to fire, and hence its flame became a symbol of transformation and regeneration. The loving relationship between male and female, therefore, as it is symbolised by the fire lizard, is represented as being characterised by mutability and flux. Its reconciliation of opposites transcends the closures of binary oppositions which conventionally

structure Western thought.

However, Prynne recognises that this interrelationship eludes linguistic description. The text of *Fire Lizard* offers intentional resistance to paraphrasis and analysis. It disrupts formal grammar and challenges the logical sequences of classical syntax. Its abrupt shifts and ellipses not only enact the problems of communication between two people, but also constitute a kind of writing in which the rhythms of the body and the unconscious would seem to break through the strict rational defenses of conscious discourse.

"Come and tell me", the poem begins. Tender, yet reassuring, these opening words of the lover to his beloved gesture towards the logocentric assumption that language is subservient to some intention or referent that lies outside itself. They betray no sense of doubt, no questioning of the supposition that one can "tell", can "communicate" or "express in words"(OED) one's inner thoughts or feelings. The phrase seems to accept the ideologies of classical discourse. It suggests that the poem is going to deal in the patriarchal values of traditional representation: the rationality, directness, and lucidity of expression, derived from ancient Grecian and Roman models which placed their premium upon communication rather than the struggles of self-expression.

This classical clarity of expression, however, dissolves away in the very next sentence of the poem into a complex image which implies, both semantically and syntactically, that there are energies in a relationship which cannot be inscribed within conventional forms of discourse. Multiple, decentred, and indefinable, these feminine energies work in contradiction to the monolithic authorities of patriarchy:

> The draw
> of the beetle, making the lane
> of water, the fire lizard.

The speaker draws his beloved to him as he asks her to "Come and tell me". It is the force of this convergence which the poem now images as the "draw / of the beetle". The metaphor suggests that that interrelationship which may be effected within the forms of conventional narrative, is something relatively small and insignificant. A beetle, de Vries writes, may serve as a symbol of "life reduced to smallness"(43). What the logical constructions of traditional communication serve to express is somehow narrow and limited in contrast to a greater whole.

This greater whole is imaged as water. Cirlot explains the symbolism:

> the primeval waters, the image of prime matter...contained all solid bodies before they acquired form and rigidity. For this reason the alchemists gave the name of "water" to quicksilver in its first stage of transmutation and, by analogy, also to the "fluid body" of Man. This "fluid body" is interpreted by modern psychology as a symbol of the unconscious, that is, of the non-formal, dynamic, motivating, female side of the personality...The waters, in short, symbolize the universal congress of potentialities, the *fons et origo*, which precedes all form and all creation. (364-365).

Water as a symbol of the non-formal, of the multiplicity and flux of an alogical and irrational unconscious, becomes a symbol of the feminine, of that which evades the formulations of patriarchal discourse. The classical structures of traditional narrative can only make a "lane", a "narrow or comparatively narrow passage or way"(OED), in its amorphous fluidity.

It is this "lane of water", this strange conjunction of formal and informal, rational and irrational, that this poem attempts to express through its image of the fire lizard. The emblematic salamander which mediates between individuality and multiplicity, between masculine and feminine, between that signification which may be produced within the static closures of binary oppositions, and that which undermines and

subverts such structures.

The poem explores this dynamic relationship, its mysterious interpenetration, reconciliation, coalescence and fusion. A confluence which man must, on the one hand, inevitably approach through the systematic sign systems within which he is inscribed, whilst on the other hand recognising that it transcends the boundaries of that very language which would seek to express it. The sudden parataxis of the phrase: "the fire lizard", emphasises the inadequacy of traditional grammar. The poem, in abandoning logically connected sequences of syntax, in jumping from one phrase to the next without the use of connectives to articulate the transition, enacts that mysterious relationship between lover and loved one, the elusive transmutations of the fire lizard.

The poem goes on to portray the way in which within a relationship one can feel at one moment almost as though one were inside and a part of one's loved one, and yet at the next as though one were outside and disconnected from them.

> I hear the front of your
> visited wish, I am
> inside it now.
>
> I hear where you go to.

On a superficially descriptive level, the speaker appears to narrate in sequential order the events that occur when his beloved addresses him, when she responds to his request to "Come and tell me". He seems to describe the wavefront of a sonic emission as it approaches his ear, washes over him, and then passes away. However, interpreted on another level the text conveys a feeling of love's wholeness, that unity which would arise from perfect communication. The speaker represents himself as "inside" his beloved's wish. He conceives of himself as a part of, and hence at one with, his beloved. The adverb, "now", places this relationship firmly in the present. Like Browning's poem, entitled

"Now", the speaker ignores historicity in favour of the eternity of a continuous present. Indeed, a comparison between Browning's "Now", and Prynne's *Fire Lizard* is illuminating.

The poem, "Now", comes to a close with the lines:

> The moment eternal - just that and no more -
> When ecstasy's utmost we clutch at the core
> While cheeks burn, arms open, eyes shut and lips
> meet![8]

This ending is crucially ambiguous. On the one hand it may be read as an allusion to sexual climax, the culmination of the expression of love, the attainment of some paradoxical "moment eternal" in which individuals lose themselves, one in the other, attaining some imaginary condition of perfect union. On the other hand, these lines may be interpreted as a representation of language's inability to cope with such a transcendent moment. They may be paraphrased as a description of the embarrassed blush, the arms opened in a gesture of helplessness, the averted vision, and finally the silence, of a poet who knows that this "moment eternal" cannot be inscribed within the temporal medium of language.

This same inability of language to inscribe a metaphysical state is recognised in Prynne's *Fire Lizard*. The phrase: "I am / inside it now", suggests that the masculine becomes engulfed in, and hence becomes a part of, and at one with, the feminine. The poem alludes perhaps to the Lacanian concept of the Imaginary, that pre-Oedipal period when the child believes itself to be a part of the mother and hence perceives no separation between self and world. However, to represent oneself within language is necessarily to be inscribed within what Lacan terms the Symbolic order, a post-Oedipal state in which the father has split up the dyadic unity of matriarchal wholeness. Patriarchal discourse cannot represent the feminine "moment eternal" of perfect union. As the feminist critic, Julia Kristeva,[9] explains in her article "Woman's Time",

the speaking/writing woman is in a space outside time, a space that allows no naming and no syntax. Syntax, she says, is constitutive of our sense of chronological time by the very fact that the order of words in a sentence marks a temporal sequence. Since subject, verb and object cannot be spoken simultaneously, their utterance necessarily cuts up the temporal continuum of eternity. It is in this context that the stanza break is significant. The absence of language, the blankness of the page, suggest that that eternal "now" of pre-Oedipal matriarchal wholeness cannot be inscribed within a patriarchal Symbolic Order.

So long as the poem images or speaks of an Imaginary union, it places itself, by virtue of its imaging or speaking, at a remove from it. It divides union. Recognising this, these lines of *Fire Lizard* are resonant with images of boundary. A front is the "foremost part of anything"(OED). Where it alludes specifically to the wave fronts of accoustic transmission, a front may be interpreted as the "continuous line or surface"(OED) made by all the waves that are in the same phase. The idea resonates with the earlier imagery of water to emphasise the way in which the temporal structures of language articulate the undifferentiated waters of the unconscious into the sequential waves of logical narrative. Even when the speaker most wants to convey a sense of union with his beloved he must describe himself as "inside", on the "inner side or surface"(OED), of her.

The sense of division is further emphasised by the use of the pronouns "I", "you", and "it". The first person pronoun, repeated at the beginning of each phrase, is especially strong. The "I" that knows itself in relation to the other has taken up a position within language, within Lacan's Symbolic Order, and to stand in the self-consciousness of language is to stand always outside the object of reflection and representation. There is an inevitable separation between the speaker and his beloved. This division is re-emphasised in the words: "I hear where you go to", where to go is to make "a movement away from the

speaker"(OED). Furthermore, the verb, "go", resonating against the poem's opening command, "[c]ome", evokes the colloquialism "come and go" thereby conveying a sense of the essential transitoriness of any interrelationship between two individuals.

Perfect communication may only ever remain a "visited wish", a transient desire. Indeed, as Jaques Lacan explains, desire and language function in similar ways, moving on endlessly from object to object, from signifier to signifier, without ever finding full satisfaction or ultimate meaning. The feminine beloved with whom the masculine lover seeks union, comes and goes, pursued through the forms of speech, yet forever eluding fixture within these forms.

The figure of the loved one is traditionally a spiritual and spiritualising entity, a figure typified by Dante's Beatrice, for example, or Petrarch's Laura. Union with the beloved would amount to the purity of a mystic wholeness. Such traditional symbols of love as the rose, the lotus flower, or the heart, are all intended, Cirlot explains, to express an "elimination of dualism and separation"(194). In contrast, however, the speaker of *Fire Lizard* addresses his beloved as: "My / love of the corners". The unconventional epithet presents love, not as something pertaining to mystical unity, to the realm of Lacan's Imaginary, but rather as something which belongs to "the corners", to the "meeting place[s] of converging sides or edges"(OED). To name love, to possess it within language, is necessarily to subject it to the divisions and boundaries which symbolic representation entails. Furthermore, in the sense in which a corner may be defined as "an extremity"(OED), the epithet conveys the idea that the patriarchal discourses of the speaker marginalise the feminine. They relegate it to a corner. The feminine, this poem suggests, is defined in terms of positionality rather than essences. Indeed, as Kristeva explains in her book, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, if femininity may be seen to have a definition at all it is simply that which is marginalised by the patriarchal symbolic order.

The poem goes on to suggest that to apprehend femininity the mind must abandon the linear orders of patriarchal discourse, the superficialities of rational explanation, moving downwards instead, through the layers of consciousness, to penetrate to some deeper level of cognition beneath. The idea resonates throughout the body of Prynne's work. The "continued quality" is "turned down, / pointed into the earth"(61), Prynne writes in "From End to End". His poem, "In Cimmerian Darkness", stresses that to be taken down "into the deeper parts / of the night", where night is traditionally symbolic of the unconscious, is to reach "that sudden dip" where man may "swing across into / some other version of this / present age"(73). It is thus that *Fire Lizard* now continues:

> If your
> scarf is a deeper blue, come
> past the bridle.

A bridle, as a "restraint" or "curb"(OED), provides an apt image for the constraints of patriarchal language. Rather than using logic or reason, the text uses symbolism to negotiate that which lies beneath the surfaces of systematic discourse. A scarf, explains de Vries(403), is traditionally symbolic of love and romance. The amorous knot was tied by the lady as a sign of favour to the man who wore it. The colour blue, de Vries goes on to write, is symbolic of "harmony, cooperation [and] spirituality". It may be used to evoke the depths of "the subconscious"(54). Interpreting *Fire Lizard* in the light of this symbolism the speaking voice would seem to be saying that if the scarf is a "deeper blue", if the harmony and co-operation of a loving relationship do not remain superficial but go "deeper", the relationship can somehow overstep the boundaries of linguistic communication and attain some transcendent realm.

The use of the comparative adjective undermines the static closure

of conceptual dualisms. Comparatives produce their meaning in relation to other items in the same series rather than in relation to their binary opposites. The poem gestures beyond the structures of traditional discourse. It seeks to deconstruct the conventional male/female opposition, evoking instead the Derridean notion of multiple, heterogenous, *différance*. The text reaches towards those "deeper" subconscious levels of the mind at which the feminine energies of the psyche may be intuited. Indeed, the conditional phrase: "If your / scarf is a deeper blue", seems almost to echo the illogical laws of a child's game whereby one can pass, one can transgress certain boundaries, if one is wearing a certain "magical" colour. The energies of the unconscious break through constraining orders of reason as the poem deconstructs the logic of classical discourse and attests to that which it represses.

It is these unconscious energies which the poem alludes to in its next lines: "the bodiless parterre / shakes the sleeve". It evokes that same elusive femininity which Prynne describes in his earlier work, *Voll Verdienst*:

> Light in the forearm it
> lies in the
> crook you can feel
> it like quick
> silver where is she now. (35)

"Fire Lizard" recognises that it too cannot fix "quick / silver" femininity. It too seems to ask the question "where is she now". A parterre is a space in a garden occupied by an ornamental arrangement of flower beds. The flowerbeds are very formalised, their arrangement so highly constructed that it seems to imply something beyond mere construction. There is an overintensification of order which gestures towards that which transcends rational structure, that which is "bodiless".

The poem cannot speak the unspeakable. It can only describe that which transcends language in negative terms, it can only define it through its "bodiless" absence. This presentation of the feminine as lack, negativity, or non-being, is reminiscent of the basic Freudian view which has shaped Western definitions of sexuality. The fundamental fact of sexual difference for Freud was that, where the male had an obvious sex organ, the penis, the female had nothing. Female difference is perceived as the absence of the male norm.

However, it is this very nothingness, this incorporeal state of absence, which "shakes the sleeve". It attracts the attention. In Elizabethan times the sleeves of men's doublets were usually detachable and, like the scarf, were often exchanged as lovers' keepsakes. The poem thus suggests that when the mind moves towards down towards some intuitive level of consciousness, a relationship between lover and beloved may be established, a communication between the masculine and the feminine aspects of the mind. Indeed it is only at this "deeper" level that the lover truly intuits what his beloved says: "There / I believe what you say".

The verb, "believe" contrasts with the earlier "hear". To "hear" something is to be affected only on the superficial level of sensory perception, but to "believe" something is to have "confidence or...trust"(OED) in it. The poem, in evoking notions of unquestioning faith, of that "unbroken trust"(19) described in "Sketch For a Financial Theory of Self", evokes notions of the feminine, of that "otherness" which, "Sketch For a Financial Theory of Self" says, may only be alluded to as that which "we *know* we cannot now have"(19).

The speaker of Prynne's *Fire Lizard* similarly recognises that he cannot inscribe within language, cannot "now have", full communication with the feminine. "There / I believe", he says, but it is unclear where "there" is. Like the "bodiless" parterre it is a space which may only be gestured towards in terms of its absence, its "otherness".

"There" is simply not "here", "not in the space that the speaker is"(OED); in this case not within the linguistic sign systems within which patriarchal modes of thought are situated.

The stanza break is again significant. As a "bodiless" space it gestures towards those imaginative energies which Kristeva describes as "indifferent to language, enigmatic",[10] those forces which "constitute the space underlying the written".[11] The stanzas, printed on the page like the arrangement of flowerbeds in a parterre, serve by their presence only to articulate that which is other than them, that absent feminine space.

The next stanza of the poem opens:

> Oh small lamp of the
> scarlet tell me: the front
> rests by the sky.

Scarlet, explains de Vries(403), may be symbolic of mutual love, whilst a lamp, *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes, may be figuratively defined as a "source or centre of light, spiritual or intellectual". In invoking a "lamp of the scarlet", therefore, the speaker would appear to invoke some apprehension of mutual love, some paradoxical commingling of the intellectual and spiritual, of masculine and feminine, which would "tell" him that "the front / rests by the sky". In so far as the "front" alludes back to the "front of your / visited wish", the speaker would seem to voice his own wish that the ultimate resting place of desire, the ultimate thing to which language gestures, should be that state of transcendence conventionally symbolised by sky.

However, the adverb, "by", implies that the wave front of accoustic transmission, the "wish" which articulates itself in language, rests only "at the edge or side of"(OED) this transcendence. Metaphysical unity is always deferred by the language that splits the speaking individual from participation in undifferentiated being. Nonetheless, as the rest of the stanza goes on to suggest, it is the perfect union of the absolute which

the lovers pursue as they strive to overthrow the language which inscribes them. "We too / seek perfect pitch", the speaker declares.

Through a sense of mutuality, here evoked by the plural pronoun, man reaches towards perception of the absolute in so far as to have "perfect pitch" is to have the "ability to judge pitch absolutely"(OED). Man seeks the "pitch" of blackness where black, de Vries(50) writes, actually symbolises the state of the absolute. The adjective, "perfect", as it may mean "entire, pure, unmixed"(OED), aptly describes this state. Thus, in the sense in which "pitch" may be interpreted according to its slang definition of "talk or chat"(OED), the poem would seem to imply that man seeks the perfect communication of an interrelationship transcending the boundaries of language. Indeed, the musical imagery recalls Mallarmé's description of that "air or song beneath the text",[12] that feminine space underlying the written which Kristeva describes as "rhythmic, unfettered, musical, anterior to judgement".[13] This is the ultimate "home" to which man aspires, as Prynne suggests in his earlier poem, "Thoughts on the Estérhazy Court Uniform":

> Music is truly the
> sound of our time, since it is how we most
> deeply recognise the home we may not
> have.(99)

Fire Lizard, however, recognises that to reach towards this "home" it is necessary to break the constraining orders of language: "Cracking nuts, leaning / either way you say so". The nut, de Vries(345) explains, is symbolic of mystery and hidden wisdom, and also folklorically of marriage, fertility and love. However, Prynne's poem also deliberately echoes the aphorism: a "hard nut to crack", thus suggesting that the lovers have to solve a difficult problem before they may attain perfect communion. They must crack the outer shell of language to reach the inner kernel or mystic centre. In these lines, as throughout, the poem tries to break the rigid structures of language by cracking syntax. In its

teasing perversions of logical construction it constitutes a kind of writing in which the energies of the unconscious graphically break through. Love cannot be expressed in grammar, the poem suggests. The paratactical phrases make no clear sense. The couplet refuses simple paraphrasis.

Perhaps in the sense in which "either" indicates that one must choose "one of the two"(OED) ways, the phrase: "leaning / either way, you say so", suggests that one can only "say" that which chooses one term only from the binary oppositions which structure language. "[S]o", meaning "in the way or manner described"(OED), alludes to that "way" which belongs to the words printed on the page.

However, "either" could equally be understood to mean "each of the two"(OED) ways, in which case the sentence gestures towards an ambivalence which cracks the binary oppositions of patriarchal discourse. In this case the "so" of "you say so" would seem to gesture not towards the printed or enunciated word but towards the blankness of the stanza break. The mysterious coalescence and fusion which the poem points towards is a merging of opposites which "you" cannot "say" within language.

The very ambiguity establishes the text as a feminine one. Functioning through Derridean notions of *différance*, it struggles to undermine patriarchal logic, working to split open the closures of binary opposition in favour of an open-ended textuality. It seeks to convey the incessant plurality, the infinite dynamisation, of the female regions of the mind.

It it these deconstructive principles which are exemplified in the opening lines of the fourth stanza: "Bright shadows point / under the snow". To use the adjective "bright", "pervaded by...light"(OED), in order to describe shadows, which are caused by the interception of light, amounts to a contradiction in terms. The oxymoron splits apart the binary logic of masculine discourse gesturing towards some female

space of indefinable multiplicity which lies beneath the frozen fixities of linguistic structure. This space, as the Jungian image of shadow suggests, is that of the primitive and instinctual side of the personality. It is this instinctive, feminine aspect of the psyche which the poem now represents as "bright" in the sense that it is "hopeful or encouraging"(OED). The speaker seems optimistic that acknowledgement of the unconscious will somehow point him towards that union he seeks, towards that love which is indeed, as Prynne writes in *Day Light Songs*, "a term / of shadow"(26).

This loving union, however, is a shadow in the sense that it is a negative reflection, an "otherness" which may only be gestured towards by its absence. The linguistic sign can only ever mark that which is absent from it, that which is lacking. As Prynne writes in *Into the Day*, "[l]ack spreads like snow"(209).

The idea that the feminine is that which is always absent, that which always evades the fixities of language, is developed in the next lines of *Fire Lizard*:

> The
> intelligence is not even
> held under.

"[I]ntelligence" may be defined as "cognisance"(OED), where cognition is knowing in its widest sense, including sensation and perception. This "intelligence" may, therefore, be taken as an allusion to that feminine aspect of the mind which is intuitively sensed rather than rationally explained. It "is not even / held under", for amorphous and fluid it cannot be gripped within the constraining orders of the written.

This elusive, feminine subconscious is the "new / thing" which "cries like a cat". The noun, "thing", is deliberately unspecific. What the speaker wishes to talk about is that "other" which remains outside naming and ideologies, outside the categorisations of gender. It cannot,

therefore, be described in terms of its positive attributes, but only in terms of how it differs from that which went before, in so far as the "new" is that which is "other than the former or the old"(OED). Furthermore, as something "new", in the sense of "strange" or "unfamiliar"(OED), the poem would seem to imply that pre-existent linguistic formulations cannot represent it. It cannot express itself in words for it "cries like a cat". The alliteration of velar stops onomatopoeically evokes "inarticulate exclamation"(OED).

The choice of simile is significant. As de Vries(85) explains, in Egyptian mythology a cat is sacred to the goddess Bast, the guardian of marriage. In the context of this poem, therefore, the "new thing" is related back to the idea of the relationship between the lover and his beloved as it in turn represents the relationship between masculine and feminine aspects of the mind.

This relationship is attained not through discourse, but through some sort of sensual communication:

> Shew me sweet with
> the fingers
>
> for that's enough.

The unvoiced sibilants, combining with the soft alliteration of approximant "w"s, convey a quietude which escapes vocalisation. The poem gestures towards an unspoken communication which is both sexual and sensual. A feeling of mutuality is suggested in the absence of a possessive adjective before "fingers". In the union of loving relationship there is no differentiation between individuals.

The stanza break is again significant. The fingers point only to a blankness, an absence further emphasised by the fact that the page must be turned at that point. It is this absence, as it paradoxically represents that which cannot be represented, which, the poem goes on to suggest,

can satisfy desire. The next stanza begins: "for that's enough", where "enough" may be defined as "as much as is...desired"(OED). Through a sensual perception which evades the structures of a linguistic sign system, the speaker of the poem would seem, for a moment, to escape the endless cravings of desire. To reach some intuitive plane which evades the orderings of rationality. It is this which Prynne describes, perhaps, in "The Holy City", in which he suggests that man may apprehend love on some simple, unquestioning, physical level. Love is, he writes:

> when, how &
> because we
> do: you...
> ...feel it
> as you walk, even quite jauntily, over the grass. (43)

With the beginning of the next sentence, however, there is a sudden change in the mood and pace of *Fire Lizard*. The "proem", the "introductory discourse" or "prelude"(OED), is over:

> The proem strides off
> as breakfast by the
> plate washed over.

The sensous, intuitive interrelationship of lover and beloved, of masculine and feminine aspects of the mind, belong to some special musing time, to those early morning hours, perhaps, which remain untroubled by the rhythms of normal, active life. The verb, "strides", marks a sudden sense of change. It registers the passing of this special time. The breakfast plates are washed and the speaker prepares to go out to work. The poem moves briskly on: "oiling the shell, / ringing the bell".

The obvious, and almost ludicrous, repetitions of rhyme and rhythm chime against each other, evoking the unthinking recurrences of daily routine: the automatic rhythms of bathing and getting dressed, of

attending to the physical "shell" of the body; the chatter and noise of a household preparing for the day, here evoked in the "ringing" of the "bell". The symbolism with which the poem had previously attempted to gesture towards a "deeper" cognitive level of the mind is abandoned in favour of the simple acoustic surfaces of language.

The broken syntax of the lines: "I cannot part you, try / as I often do", dramatises the speaker's inarticulate sense of pain at the moment of his leaving. He "cannot part" from his beloved because he feels at one with her, a "part" of her, and hence cannot bear to divide or break that relationship into parts. However, as Prynne says in "The Stranger, Instantly", "a restless time / prevails"(40). The temporal pressures of a dominant patriarchal order will not allow the speaker to remain a "part" of his beloved.

> The hour
> snaps up my tinder bank
> and where will be
> the last of her
>
> time to go with it;
> which is the step.

Tinder is the "dry, inflammable substance that readily takes fire from a spark and burns"(OED). In the context of this poem it might be construed as a reference to that store of tinder which kindles the fire in which the salamander lives. It kindles, therefore, that fire which symbolises the relationship between the amorphous intuition of the feminine and the ordered logic of the masculine. This fire eludes the temporal representations of linguistic sequences. It is the "hour" which "snaps up" the kindling so that the flame may not be sparked. The onomatopoeic verb emphasises the suddenness of the break, the way in which the speaker moves from feeling that he is inside his beloved, a part of her, to feeling that he is outside her again. There is no articulation of the transition from one state to another. Rather, back in

the masculine realm of temporal sequence, the speaker finds that it is time to go with "the last of her", where the "last", as the "ultimate limit"(OED), evokes an abrupt boundary.

The feminine appears as the limit or borderline of male orders. Indeed, as Prynne suggests in "How Its Done", the feminine is that for which "there is no name but the event, / of its leaving"(44). Now, in *Fire Lizard*, the use of the third person pronoun, "her", emphasises this. The lover defines his beloved as that which is separate from himself. He has made that transition from the inside to the outside "which is the step".

A step, explains Cirlot(312-313), as symbolic of communication between different vertical levels, images the breakthrough from one plane of existence to another. The step which the speaker now takes, therefore, would seem to lead him from the deep, atemporal realm of his feminine subconscious to the superficial temporal one of masculine rationality.

The actual moment of transition is elusive. Although there are no interrogation marks, there is a tone of query in the two phrases: "where will be / the last of her", and "which is the step". The moment of change, the poem suggests, may not be precisely defined. Its gradations belong to some amorphous region evading denomination. The unanswered questions evoke a sense of forlorness and bewilderment as the speaker, finding himself in a time of transition, seeks to understand that which eludes the categorisations within which understanding is inscribed.

With the opening of the next stanza the step has been taken, there has been an abrupt change in the speaker's positioning:

> As you say so he
> takes his flit, over
>
> the water creamy
> toes.

The shift from the first, to the third person pronoun effects a significant modulation in perspective. In the use of the pronoun "he" and its genitive "his", the speaker stands outside himself, representing himself to himself as an object. It is at this moment that he "takes his flit", where to "flit" is to "shift one's position in a material or immaterial sense"(OED). The lover moves away from his beloved both physically and mentally. The separation contrasts strongly with the earlier drawing together evoked in the imperative phrases: "Come and tell me", "come / past the bridle". The speaker no longer explores the depths of his feminine subconscious. His mind skims over the surfaces of the water. The imagery resonates with that of Prynne's earlier poem, "On the Matter of Thermal Packing", in which traditional Enlightenment views of the world are represented as being:

> borne over the
> top skimming
> not knowing the flicker
> that joins (83)

Nonetheless, in *Fire Lizard*, the image of "creamy toes", in so far as it suggests that the speaker's feet still trail in the water, whipping up a light froth, asserts that the speaker does not adopt a purely Enlightenment viewpoint. There is still some slight connection between the lover and his beloved, between the orders of masculine rationality and the fluid irrationality of the feminine subconscious. It is this tenuous connection which the end of the sentence explores as it describes: "envy with coins / right by the phone box".

The phone box becomes an emblem of both connection and separation; of the communication and, at the same time, the disjunction of the lovers. The speaker describes his mood as that of envy, where to have envy is to "wish oneself on a level with (another) in...the possession of something desirable"(OED). However, the speaker's wish for possession of his beloved, his desire to be at one with the feminine

aspects of his mind, is not attainable. He has taken "the step", moving from the depth to the surface, and thus can no longer relate to his beloved at that subconscious level of the "deeper blue". His envy, his desire for possession, will never be satisfied. Like the visited wish earlier in the poem, it will never, it seems, come to "rest by the sky".

Instead the interfaces and boundaries constructed by a masculine, phallocentric viewpoint are emphasised. The phrase does more than merely conjure up a naturalistic image of a man standing by a phone box, chinking his coins impatiently in his hands perhaps, as he waits for the person inside to finish. The speaker is standing "right by the phone box". He is not even inside it. A sense of division is stressed. The "coins" further emphasise this. Just as words have no inherent meaning so coins have no inherent value. They too belong to a symbolic order and can only ever be representative.

The communication between the two lovers fades through mediating layers: "We are the recession / of blue green". The colours have symbolic meaning. Blue, as has already been suggested, relates to the unconscious, whilst green, de Vries(227) explains, is the colour of Aphrodite and hence symbolises love. The "blue green" would, therefore, seem to represent that notion of subconscious love alluded to in the first part of the poem, that concept of perfect communication which evades the boundaries and denominations of language. It is this mutuality, gestured towards by the use of the plural pronoun "we", that is now represented as being in "recession". It dwindles away into the blankness of the page as the stanza reaches its end.

With the opening of the next stanza the division has clearly not been healed: "The broken dangerous cup / is not mended". A cup, de Vries writes, is a "pure symbol of containment"(123). It would seem, therefore, to be aptly representative of that containment of the lover within the beloved, of the masculine within the feminine, which would amount to perfect union. Perhaps the image alludes also to the loving

cup, a vessel of wine passed from hand to hand round an assembled company to symbolise a closeness of relationship. It is this cup which has not been "mended" by the telephone conversation. It has not been "restore[d] to a complete or sound condition"(OED). The phrase, "broken dangerous cup", not only onomatopoeically evokes the jagged edges of fractured china, but also, through the very fact that it is awkward to articulate, emphasises that it is language itself which leaves the cup "broken", "separated forcibly into parts"(OED). Language cannot assert that transcendent union which would be the "mend[ing]" of the parts. The image recalls, perhaps, Yeat's idea that: "Form must be full, sphere-like, single". That the poet should "get all the wine into the bowl".[14] Now, *Fire Lizard* recognises that poetry can never be full or sphere-like. Form is disrupted. Grammar and syntax are broken. The cup can never contain all the wine.

Although man might intuitively feel the possibility of transcendent union, inscribed within an essentially divisive language he may never attain it:

> The point of sky has
> all that in sight but
> optics apart.

The speaker imagines that the "point of sky", perhaps that part of the sky which he sees as he looks upwards, somehow unites himself with his beloved, despite the fact that their "optics", their "organ[s] of sight"(OED), are apart. Indeed, de Vries writes, the sky is symbolic of that which is "all-seeing"(428) and, as Cirlot(122) explains, the graphic mark of a point is a symbol of unity. Also, where a "point" is defined as the "intersection of two lines"(OED), the poem would seem to view the sky as a place where the boundaries which define individual identity intersect and hence conjoin. This metaphysical union is that insight which the words "in sight" pun upon. Furthermore, where an insight

may be defined as an "understanding" of "the inner character of hidden nature of things", a "view beneath the surface"(OED), the poem suggests that this imaginative insight belongs to the deeper, subconscious regions of the mind, to its feminine aspects.

Language, however, serves only to befuddle and confuse this insight. There is ironic humour in the following lines:

> Parsecs
> fiddle the onion
> don't you know?

Parsecs, the *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes, are "a unit of length equal to the distance at which a star would have a heliocentric parallax of one second of an arc". If, as the previous lines have suggested, the point or purpose of the sky is that it somehow encompasses everything into a union which lies beyond the divisions of language, to divide the sky into gradations as a physicist does when he measures it in parsecs, is to destroy that union. It is to "fiddle the onion", where an onion, its name derived from the Latin, *unio*, is a symbol of unity. It is interesting to note, perhaps, that the unit called the parsec derives its name from par(allax) and sec(ond). A parsec thus relates to the dimensions of space and time. In saying that these parsecs "fiddle the onion" the poem implies that that unity represented by the onion is something which transcends the temporal and sequential orders of language.

The poem alludes also to the colloquialism "to know one's onions", as it means to be experienced or knowledgeable on a subject. The masculine rationality that would divide the sky into parsecs, the poem suggests, "fiddle[s]" one's knowledge in the sense that it "cheat[s]" or "swindle[s]"(OED) it. It deprives man of that irrational intuition, that unconscious cognisance by which he might apprehend the feminine spaces transcending the structures of the symbolic order. "Don't you

know?" that this is happening the speaker asks at the end of the stanza.

His question runs on into the next verse:

> Don't you know?
>
> Or care what the cave
> says, who said it.

In so far as a cave may symbolise the unconscious, the speaker seems to challenge himself, questioning himself as to how much attention he pays to this feminine aspect of his mind. He seems to ask himself whether he knows or even cares about it. However, the phrase, "who said it", slipping in, half-question, half-statement, without punctuation or the copula of logical enunciation, suggests, perhaps, that it is the unconscious mind itself which now sneaks through the gaps in rational structures. The disembodied voice is subtly elusive. It cannot be identified. Indeed, the poem almost appears to question whether "it" was ever said at all.

The question is never answered and the poem goes on: "Burning the gum while / the bird made solemn mock". The "gum" is probably an allusion to *Gummi arabicum*, a substance used alchemically to denote transmutation. As Cirlot explains, alchemists believed that "once spiritualised [this gum] became endowed with analagous properties of spiritual adhesion"(134). The image of "burning the gum" would, therefore, seem to be a reference to that transmutation which occurs between lover and beloved, between the masculine and feminine, in that dynamic intercommunication which this poem represents as love. As the image of the mocking bird suggests, however, linguistic expression can only ever be a "mock" of this love, a "counterfeit" or "imitation"(OED). The "solemn" or formal orders of a patriarchal language cannot express the loving union of multiplicity, transcending as it does the binary oppositions of traditional, linguistic structure.

Thought is defined within language. The speaker of this poem

cannot exist in any simple sense apart from his speaking. Alluding to himself in the third person he, the subject, becomes the object of his own representations: "He says balsam in / defence, warningly on".

Balsam is an aromatic oil used for healing wounds and soothing pain. It is, de Vries(33) writes, symbolic of ardent love. In these lines the speaker invokes ideal love, he invokes notions of unity and wholeness, in an attempt to heal the division between himself and his beloved. To soothe the painful knowledge that all language and the self that exists within language are second hand, alienated and fallen. It is this knowledge which the "cave" has brought him, in the sense in which the cave could be interpreted as an allusion to the Platonic cave of shadows. Plato represents man as a prisoner in a cave with a fire behind him and a wall in front. All that man can see are shadows cast on the wall of the cave, shadows which he takes to be real. Whilst man is alive he can never escape from the cave, and there is a sense in this stanza that the speaker tries to defend himself from the pain of this knowledge. By speaking "warningly on", he tries to ward off the painful apprehension of his human situation. He tries to defend himself from knowledge of his injury, from apprehension of his incompletion, by invoking balsam, the healing concept of love.

Nonetheless, it is recognising himself to be essentially inscribed within language and hence necessarily wounded, that the speaker goes on to ask:

> Are you hurt now,
> scalded anywhere on
> the arm.

The image of hurt, where to be hurt is to be "[i]njured" or "wounded"(OED) either bodily or mentally, alludes back to that hurt incurred by the knowledge that, inscribed within the sign systems of linguistic communication, man is necessarily precluded from unity. He

cannot attain that transmutation represented by fire. Rather, this fire, as it is represented within language, would seem to threaten to scald man, to pain him with the knowledge that his consciousness is constrained within and wounded by language. Earlier in the poem the "bodiless parterre" (representing the feminine subconsious), drew the speaker's attention. But this intuition, the poem now implies, can only generate a sense of pain and hurt that the realm of "otherness" may never be fully attained. It can only bring that "suffering" which, Prynne suggests in his earlier poem, "Against Hurt", results from the painful dichotomy between what men know "they should be"(52) and what they actually are. It comes from that sense of separation explored in "Bite on the Crown" where, though "hurt is lustful / for relief", "touch shows / only the mirror" and hence "opens out the harm"(182). To be conscious is necessarily to be divided from the other, and hence to be precluded from healing completion.

Traditional masculine discourse subsumes notions of femininity:

> I take your
> part my Russian winter,
> ice on the stream.

The self-conscious "I", necessarily co-extensive with the patriarchal orders of language, takes possession of the unconscious feminine psyche, here represented by winter, in so far as winter, de Vries explains(398), is traditionally symbolised by the salamander. The image of winter thus appears, also, to relate back to the poem's earlier references to snow as emblematic of the frozen fixities of linguistic structure. The speaker now suggests that it is impossible to escape these frozen fixities for a Russian winter is one that is particularly hard, one in which the thaw never comes.

Realising this, the speaker images his beloved as "ice on the stream". Cirlot explains the symbolism of ice:

> Given that water is the symbol of communication between the formal and the informal, the element of transition between different cycles, yielding by nature, and also related to the ideas of material, earthly fecundity and the Heraclitean "death of the soul", it follows that ice represents principally two things: first, the change induced in water by the cold - that is, the "congelation" of its symbolic significance; and secondly, the stultification of the potentialities of water. Hence ice has been defined as the rigid dividing-line between consciousness and the unconscious (or between any other dynamic levels.(155-156)

The poem once more gestures towards a patriarchal representation of woman as marginal. It recognises the Kristevan view that woman are defined not in terms of essences, but in terms of positionality. The loved one, viewed as "ice on the stream", is femininity seen as the limit or borderline of the symbolic order. The stream, the amorphous fluidity of the unconscious, is sealed off by the essentially divisive structures of patriarchal language. The poem does not deny these feminine energies. Just as in a relationship one can sense that beneath the patterns of convention there are feelings and emotions running fluid and free, so the mind can somehow intuit the indefinable energies of the subconscious. However, to express a relationship, to become conscious of it, is necessarily to divide oneself from its proffered union by the formal surfaces of language.

Language may never express or communicate that confluence which is imaged in *Fire Lizard* as love.

> Banded opal
> in the mouth of June, why
> not. I know why.

At first these lines would seem to suggest that lover and beloved, masculine and feminine, should be conjoined. The "[b]anded opal" might refer to the wedding ring, the symbol that male and female are

banded, "[b]ound or fastened"(OED) together. June, as the sixth month of the year, the month of the summer solstice, would be an appropriate time for such a marriage. Mediating between the two halves of the year, it images that balance in which the binary oppositions of language, now gestured towards through the "mouth" as it represents the power of speech, are deconstructed, their dualisms in some way reconciled.

"[W]hy / not" this marriage, the speaker asks. "I know why". The self-conscious "I", representing himself in distinction from the other, is precluded from relationship with that feminine unconscious which knows no division. The adjective "banded" now seems to mean "[m]arked with bands or stripes"(OED). It evokes the boundaries inherent in the denominations of language. The stanza thus goes on to give the reason why the marriage of lover and beloved, between masculine and feminine, may never be achieved:

> The fish
> delays, that's why, scale
> rattles over the crossing.

A fish, Cirlot explains, is broadly symbolic of "psychic being"(106). It is associated with unconscious aspects of the mind. The poem would seem to suggest, therefore, that the reason that the marriage between masculine and feminine may never be inscribed by language is because the subconscious "delays". Perfect relationship may never be fully present within language for this language, functioning through processes of endless deferral or delay, can never describe such ultimate union.

The "scale / rattles over the crossing", the poem goes on. A scale, as the outermost integument of the fish, would seem to represent those patriarchal systems which encase the feminine unconscious. Language, the poem suggests, does not allow a smooth transference from one state to the other. It "rattles". The onomatopoeic verb emphasises the

disturbance, the fact that language marks the boundaries of transition and hence precludes perfect unity. The imagery reflects that of Prynne's earlier poem, "On The Matter of Thermal Packing", in which the Enlightenment precepts which the narrator has known as a "competence for so long"(83), are described as a:

> case hardened
> but brittle
>
> constant to the eighteenth century (83)

Furthermore, where a "scale" could be interpreted as an allusion to a balance, *Fire Lizard* would seem to reaffirm that the linguistic systems which inscribe human thought disrupt the balance, the harmony of interrelationship, between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind.

As the poem draws to its end, its closing couplet is subtly ambigous: "Still I love you. / That's the reason too". In one sense these lines suggest that to say "I love you", to express love even in the simplest way, is ironically to preclude the perfect mutuality of a loving relationship. The very pronouns, "I" and "you", mark individual identity and hence preclude union.

In the sense in which to be "still" is to "refrain from speaking"(OED) the poem implies that the masculine speaker can only love the beloved when she is quiet, when she is, in a sense, absent. In accordance with the binary principles which structure language, if one term is to acquire meaning it must destroy the other. For the lover to declare: "I love you", the beloved must be silent and still. Victory is equated with activity and defeat with passivity, and under the patriarchal systems of the symbolic order the male is always the victor. As Cixous writes: "either woman is passive or she doesn't exist".[15]

This final couplet would seem to acknowledge that there is no pure female space from which one can speak. One has to accept one's

position within an order which precedes one, within the framework of a symbolic language. Though man may question this language, working to undermine the static closures of its binary oppositions, struggling to reveal its limitations and inadequacies, in the end he must accept that there is no escape. In its final lines the poem returns to a simple acceptance of the classical tenets of reason, order, and lucidity with which it opened. There is, it suggests, no other way, than that inscribed within the patriarchal order.

However, the poem does not necessarily deny the existence of the feminine realm, of some "other" transcendent space. Again, in the sense in which to be "still" is to refrain from speech, the male speaker could be seen to assert that when he himself is "[s]till" he may love his beloved. When one is silent the masculine aspects of a mind may dissolve into the indefinable fluidity of its feminine regions. This relationship, however, eludes all expression. The speaking voice fades into the silence of the poem's end.

It is thus that *Fire Lizard* may, in the end, be seen as a further stage in Prynne's explorations of man's existential paradox. As Prynne writes in his poem, "The Western Gate", "we shiver with reason and with love". Man exists in a state of tension, flickering between different conditions. His consciousness necessarily represents itself within the structures of rationality, and yet man has an intuition which yearns to reach beyond this, he has a sense that there is something else which this reason can never explain. Perfect understanding of this "otherness" would amount to perfect communion with it. It would amount to an ideal union such as that which is evoked in *Fire Lizard*, through the imagery of love. However, inscribed within the orders of a patriarchal rationality, man, nostalgic for this ideal interrelationship, must recognise, nonetheless, that he may never achieve it. He may never resolve the conflicts of his existential dilemmas.

1. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, translated by Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p.63.
2. Toril Moi, *Sexual / Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985), p.105.
3. Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p.12.
4. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981), p.253.
5. Julia Kristeva, "La femme, ce n'est jamais ca", *Tel Quel* 59, (Autumn, 1974), p.21.
6. Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", p.254.
7. Quoted by Moi, *Sexual / Textual Politics*, p.107.
8. Robert Browning, "Now", *The Works of Robert Browning*, Centenary Edition, 10 Vols (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1913), p.288. l.17.
9. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, translated by Margaret Waller (New York: Colombia University Press, 1984), p.29.
10. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p.29.
11. Ibid. p.29.
12. Stephan Mallarmé, "Le Mystère dans les Lettres" in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p.387.
13. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p.29.
14. W.B. Yeats, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse: 1992-1935*, edited by W.B. Yeats (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), pp.xxiv-xxv.
15. Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, p.64.

ACQUISITION OF LOVE

The children rise and fall as they
watch, they burn in the sun's coronal
display, each child is the fringe
and he advances at just that blinding
gradient. As I try to mend the broken
mower, its ratchet jammed somewhere
inside the crank-case, I feel the
blood all rush in a separate spiral,
each genetically confirmed in the
young heartlands beyond. The curious
ones have their courses set towards
fear and collapse, faces switch on and
off, it is not any image of learning
but the gene pool itself defines these
lively feelings. I get the casing off,
sitting on the flat stone slab by the
front door, you would think fortunes
could be born here and you would
be wrong. Their childish assertion is
bleeding into the centre, we are determined
that they shall do this: they look outwards
to our idea of the planet. Their blood
is battered by this idea, the rules for
the replication of pattern guide their dreams
safely into our dreams. The two ratchets
are both rusted in; I file out their
slots and brush out the corroded
flakes with oil. They watch, and
what they watch has nothing to do
with anything. What they do is an
inherited print, I lend it to them
just by looking & only their blood
seems to hold out against the complete
neuro-chemical entail. I guess their
capacity in pints, the dream-like membranes
which keep their faces ready to see. The
mower works now, related to nothing

but the hand and purpose, the fear of
collapse is pumped round by each linked
system & the borrowed warmth of the heart.

CHAPTER FIVE

ACQUISITION OF LOVE.

Physically human beings function as animals, and since the discoveries of Darwin in the late nineteenth century it has been easy to conjecture that long slow evolution of the australopithecines into *homo sapiens*, which has left man with the knowledge that he is descended from the apes; that he is, in part at least, a mere beast. However, at the same time man also senses that he is more than an animal. He is possessed of a mental capacity superior to that of any other creature, he has a consciousness which sets him apart. This conscious capacity is what has since been termed the ego.

The cerebral cortex in man is a mass of grey cells filling the frontal area of the skull, the area which gives the human head its domed appearance, so different from that flat, foreheadless one of the apes. Studies have shown that this cortex serves as a complex control panel for reactivity to the environment. It acts as a sort of internal monitor regulating and directing the organism, and at the same time keeping the environment at a distance and well sorted out. To talk about the ego, therefore, is to talk about the unique process of centrally controlled behaviour in a large brained animal.

The ego organises perception and bodily control by giving the world of events a fixed point of self-reference. It assigns the individual a definite and unique place in creation. Everything that exists is related to an acute consciousness of "I" on the part of the organism and, since in order to have consciousness of self the animal must have a precise designation of self, the ego necessarily takes shape symbolically.

Human nature may be considered to be part animal and part

symbolic and it is an acknowledgment of this duality which leads towards recognition of the existential enigma of the human situation. Man is the only creature in nature who, by virtue of his self-consciousness, can regard himself as an object, dwelling upon himself as a unique and special individual, whilst at the same time paradoxically recognising his inevitable fate as an animal. As Ernest Becker, a professor of Behavioural Sciences, explains:

> man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet. This immense expansion, this dexterity, this ethereality, this self-consciousness gives to man literally the status of a small god in nature, as Renaissance thinkers knew...Yet at the same time, as the Eastern sages knew man is a worm and food for worms.[1]

For centuries philosphers looked for the essence of man, for his soul, for some special quality or substance which set him apart from other animals. Nowadays, as Prynne's poems, "Concerning Quality, Again" and "The Common Gain, Reverted" have suggested, man recognises that there is no such essence. If he is defined by anything, these poems have seemed to imply, it is by his paradoxical nature, by the fact that his very existence is a dilemma. It is this existential dilemma which "Acquisition of Love" now goes on to explore.

"How can we sustain such constant loss"(97), Prynne asks in his poem, "Thoughts On The Estérhazy Court Uniform". How can man face up to the feeling that his identity is lost? How can he fully confront the idea that he is nothing more than an unindividuated part of nature? It is these questions which "Acquisition of Love" now seeks to answer. Man, the poem recognises, must work against the frustration and despair of creature consciousness by creating meaning in his life, by reinforcing his sense of unique importance and self-value. It is for this

reason that the concept of heroism or self-esteem, becomes central to human nature. It lies at the very heart of human adaptation, the reflex behind man's terror of death, behind his fear that he will lose himself.

Self-esteem may be understood in the child as his sense of inner self-righteousness, his feeling that all is right in his action world. Arming the child against anxiety, it may be seen as a natural systematic continuation of the ego, for, as Freud explains, the ego grows by learning to put anxiety under its control. It is thus that a qualitative feeling of self value, in so far as it epitomises the whole development of the ego, may be taken to be the basic predicate of human action. Indeed, as Prynne writes in "The Numbers", since "[w]e *are* alive, the esteem already is / there in potential"(11). To be human is necessarily to be possessed of a sense of self-esteem.

As a child develops it switches from a bodily to a symbolic mode of attaining self-esteem. Man becomes vitally dependent on a symbolic constitution of his worth. He creates within his world of symbols justifications of himself as an object of primary value. Indeed, the whole of human society may be interpreted as a symbolic action system for men, as a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules of behaviour, designed expressly to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism. The hope and belief is that the things man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they can outshine death and decay.

The previous chapters of this thesis have been principally concerned to explore the way in which man finds himself essentially inscribed by symbolic systems within which all meaning is necessarily constructed. Yet the poems have seemed to suggest that at the same time there is something which lies outside these systems, outside the rational structures through which conscious conceptualisation comes into being. They have sought to attain a closer understanding of the human situation by exploring it in relation to some metaphysical "other" which lies beyond.

"Acquisition of Love", too, explores man's existential predicament. It too searches for ontological understanding. However, it does so not through exploring a relationship with the transcendent, with some ultimate meaning which defines man and holds him in place, but rather through showing that it is exactly man's need for belief in such metaphysical concepts which produces the structures which define him. By exploring why it is necessary for man to validate his life in terms of that which transcends it, the poem somehow comes to terms with the nature of human existence, with that existential paradox which lies at the core of man. It attempts to lay bare the crucial distinction between man, and man's ideas of himself, and it is thus that it attains that distinctive strength, that power which, as the philosopher Hegel suggests, lies in nothing less than an ability to support contradictions.[2]

In a time when society was primarily religious man was given meaning by belief in God. He offered himself up to God and in return was rewarded with eternal life. The Judaeo-Christian world picture took man's very creature- consciousness and made of it the condition of his sense that human life was ultimately significant. In a secular age, however, man had a problem. He still needed to feel heroic, to know that his life mattered in the scheme of things, but he was faced with the difficulty of how to achieve this. It is in this context that the concept of love becomes so important. In a secular world man substitutes his need for divinity with his need for romantic love. He replaces declining collective ideologies of religion with an individual ideology of justification. Prynne recognises this in several of his poems. "Song in Sight of the World", for example, draws to its conclusion with the lines:

> to
> love is the last resort, you
> must know, I will tell
> you, this, love, is
> the world.
> (76)

Similarly, in "Of Sanguine Fire", Prynne writes of love as:

> an intensely chaste brush with
> the idea of heat, its warm likeness
> melted down into
> legal guardianship, of the
> frail pinnace. (177)

If "heat", as it is related to fire, is taken (as de Vries[187]suggests), to be a symbol of Supreme Deity, then "Of Sanguine Fire" would seem to be saying that in a secular world the idea of divinity is replaced by its "melted down" counterpart, love, as the guardian responsible for the safe-keeping, of the "frail pinnace" of mortal being.

In romantic love man fixes his desire for cosmic heroism, for the ultimate meaningfulness of life, onto a lover who then becomes the glorious ideal within which life might be fulfilled. The love object is, as it were, deified. Spirituality is brought down to earth and given form, and the self is then elevated by joining its destiny to this beatified human being. "[W]e are then who we / love"(132), writes Prynne in "And Only Fortune Shines". There is a total identification of lover and beloved. A union which banishes the threat of helplessness and separation, of anxious self-consciousness of the body. In perfect consummation man purges his inner conflicts, the terrible existential dilemmas of his human nature.

Throughout the traditions of art love has been elevated into something akin to the divine. One sees, for instance, the mythification of such famous lovers as Alcibiades and Socrates, Heloise and Abelard, or Dante and Beatrice. Petrarch "blends the real and the ethereal in the poetry of love with...absolute skill",[3] writes Palgrave. In Renaissance literature, Marlowe's Tamburlaine places Zenocrate, she who is "lovelier than the love of Jove",[4] at the pinnacle of earthly powers. Chapman's Ovid finds the soul through the senses.[5] Donne proposes that

lovers in their bliss are sanctified like saints.[6] Though the Age of Enlightenment, dominated by rationalist methodologies, produced less of this type of love poetry, the nineteenth century, with its spirit of Romanticism was rich in it. Romantic poets yearn for some unity which lies outside everyday experience, for something which makes human nature more than a product of theoretical science. The Romantic view of Absolute love links man to eternity. As Byron writes in "Childe Harolde's Pilgrimage": "Oh love! no habitant of earth thou art, / An unseen Seraph we believe in thee".[7] Keats, in "Endymion" describes love as an "orbed drop / of light", as the richest "enthralment" known to man, his "chief intensity". "Melting into its radiance", he says, "we blend, / Mingle, and so become a part of it". With nothing else can "our souls interknit / so wingedly".[8]

Counteracting these Romantic views, however, came the discoveries of Darwin, the postulations that man was merely a species of animal; that, evolved from primate ancestors, he was little more than a biological machine. The idea terrified the Victorian mind. The redemptive precepts of Romanticism became the basis of evolving Modernism and it was love that became the saving power, the commanding absolute of a secular age. Love became the classic response to a retreating faith. "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!", cries the bewildered Arnold in "Dover Beach".[9] The agnostic, Hardy, creates his own redemptive hauntings in poems dedicated to the memory of his lost wife. In "In Memoriam", Tennyson clings to his love for his lost friend, Hallam.

However, it is in the work of Browning, perhaps, that one can see the first real starting point of modern, analytical love poetry. Prynne's *Fire Lizard*, discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, has been shown to lie in this Browningesque tradition. In exploring the way in which an idealised relationship necessarily eludes the language which would speak of it, *Fire Lizard* confronts the sheer existential difficulties

of love. It points towards the fallacies of traditional Romantic concepts. Prynne takes up these ideas and develops them in "Acquisition of Love", a poem which, as it reveals the illusory nature of the experience of love, reveals too an invalidity in all justifications of human existence.

"Love", the title of the poem says, is an "Acquisition". In the sense in which to acquire may be defined as: to "obtain, or get...(by one's own exertions or qualities)"(OED), the poem suggests that love, rather than being some metaphysical gift, is something humanly gained. The title perhaps deliberately evokes the biological concept of acquired character, that "development in an individual plant or animal occuring during its lifetime through the influence of its environment"(OED). This introduces the idea that the poem is going to attempt to look through the traditional illusions of romantic love and reveal it to be nothing more than a notion induced by man's environment, by the influences of human culture and society.

This task, as the poem recognises, is a difficult one. As an organism man finds it monstrously difficult to step outside himself, to distinguish between the organism and the organism's idea of itself. Man must make himself conscious of the processes by which he acquires his self-esteem, and hence must make himself aware of the way in which he develops his ego, develops that unique sense of self which marks him as distinctively human. The poem is to place a crucial problem. Everything painful and sobering in what psychoanalytical and religious thought have discovered about man revolves around his terror of admitting what he is doing to earn his self-esteem. If man could strip away his illusions he would arrive at the most potentially liberating question of all: he would ask himself how empirically true was that cultural hero system upon which he relies for sustainment.

"Acquisition of Love" is controlled by the metaphor of a man mending a mowing machine. The image is significant. It connects Prynne's work to the seventeenth century Metaphysical tradition, and

most especially to Marvell's series of mowing poems in which the traditional rustic figure of the mower is presented, musing upon the nature of life, love, and death. The Metaphysical poets had a tendency towards the psychological analysis of emotions, and it is directly from this tradition that "Acquisition of Love" springs, reacting against Romantic concepts just as the Metaphysicals reacted against the pastoral conventionalism of the Elizabethan age.

In "Acquisition of Love" the dismantling of the mowing machine is paralleled to the dismantling of the psychological "organ" of the human ego. The metaphor controls the poem like a metaphysical conceit, the images yoked together like the genetic spirals of the double helix, which is itself to play such an important part in the imagistic structure of this poem. The sentences coil down the page, one interlocking with the next, the whole without indentation or stanza break, so that even the appearance of the print on the page images the analogy between the interlocking ratchets and cogs of the mowing machine and the bonded spirals of the D.N.A. helix which determines human nature. Man is paralleled with a machine. Indeed, the term "mower" may describe either the man or the machine that cuts the grass.

The process of mowing a lawn forms a suitable analogy for the cultural systems which give meaning to human life. To mow the lawn is not biologically necessary to human existence, yet, within a Western system of cultural values, to have a neat and tidy lawn has somehow come to represent a sense of accomplishment and worth, of order and control.

As the poem opens the mower is already broken. In a secular world human life can no longer be validated through belief in a transcendent God. Nor, in the contemporary world, can idealisations of romantic love provide an adequate replacement for lost religious ideologies. The mower, the cultural machine is broken. The aim of Prynne's poem is to try and mend it, to search for a new set of values which might motivate

and empower human life.

"Acquisition of Love" opens with the portrayal of a scene in which a circle of children gather around the narrator of the poem, watching him as he mends a broken lawnmower:

> The children rise and fall as they
> watch, they burn in the sun's coronal
> display, each child is the fringe
> and he advances at just that blinding
> gradient.

These lines may be interpreted on a simply descriptive level. The children "rise and fall", bobbing and ducking as they encircle the narrator, and, as this narrator squints up at them, they seem, shimmering and "burn[ing]" in the brightness, to form the shadowy fringe of a ring of sunlight, whilst the dazzling sunrays falling between them appear exactly to define the line of approach which each child will take towards the centre of the ring.

However, this opening sentence serves as more than a naturalistic description. It works on another level to introduce the principal themes of the poem. Imagistic implications suggest a basic awareness of the Platonic traditions of thought which have shaped Western philosophy. They acknowledge traditional beliefs in the existence of some transcendent state existing beyond this world, an ideal state towards which man may aspire but which he may never attain. It is this ideal state of unselfconscious perfection which myths of romantic love seek to recreate in their effort to protect man from his sense of incompleteness and flawed identity.

The image of children in a garden forms a traditional metaphor for mankind before the Fall, for that prelapsarian state of completeness which linked man to a transcendental beyond. Indeed, Cirlot writes, in Christian iconography children often appear as angels, and hence become symbolic of "the powers ascending and descending between the

Source-of-Life and the world of phenomena"(9). Furthermore, Cirlot explains, psychologically speaking "the child is of the soul". It is the "product of the *coniunctio* between the unconscious and the consciousness"(45) and as such represents a fullness of identity. Perhaps the verb, "burn", specifically evokes this metaphysical quality, for to "burn", to pass through fire, Cirlot(106) says, is representative of a process of transcendence. Even the "corona" may attain a symbolic meaning. Deriving from the Latin word for "crown or wreath"(OED), it evokes an image of the crowned children which Cirlot explains, traditionally represent the philosophers stone, that "supreme realisation of mystic identification with the 'god within us' and with the eternal"(46).

An initial reading of the poem would, therefore, seem to introduce that sense of interaction between human and divine which has traditionally provided a defining authority for the human imagination, an absolute cognitive frame of reference around which thought has been organised. The opening lines, for example, as they image the children caught in the splendour of the sun's "display", seem deliberately to echo the famous Wordsworthian "Ode" in which the glorious world of childhood appears "[a]pparelled in celestial light".[10]

In Prynne's "Acquisition of Love", however, the customary linkage between divinity and man is no longer affirmed. Although Prynne clearly recognises the traditional views, and continues as the poem goes on to acknowledge their importance, the stance which the narrator takes appears to be grounded in Darwinian theories of evolution, in the knowledge that man is derived from the animals and is, at base, merely a biological machine.

Whilst on one level the opening of the poem images the children as special animals who "rise" crowned above other creatures, it simultaneously suggests the idea that these children, like any other animal, will die. "The children rise and fall", the poem says. Where to

"rise" may be defined as "to come into existence...to be born"(OED), and to "fall", "to become advanced in years...to fall dead" (OED), the children appear to be linked to the inescapable patterns of nature, to the rhythmic inevitability of birth, generation and death, emphasised here by the regularity of the iambic stress.

The antithesis, "rise and fall", succinctly expresses man's existential dilemma. The very fact that the children "rise", that they attain some "higher level"(OED) of mental development, means necessarily that they must "fall", they must be lowered to an awareness of their animal nature. The poem evokes the biblical myth of the Fall from Paradise in which man, emerging from the instinctive, thoughtless action of the lower animals, came to reflect for the first time upon his condition. After the Fall, Adam and Eve could no longer view themselves as transcendent creatures. They had to recognise their physical nature. In the same way all men are traditionally seen as the inheritors of a fallen nature. Whilst having a consciousness of their individuality, of their special place in the world, they are at the same time painfully aware of their own inevitable death and decay. Indeed, as Prynne explains in "Señor Vasquez Speaking And Further Soft Music To Eat By", the world to which man belongs:

> is an
> intimately physical place,
> picked out of the air like
> forbidden fruit. (96)

An acknowledgement of human transitoriness is not new to the traditions of poetry. The opening of "Acquistion of Love" recalls, for instance, Imogen's lament in *Cymbeline*: "Golden lads and girls all must / As chimney sweepers come to dust".[11] Similarly, Wordsworth's "Ode" is written from the perspective of one who knows that the "visionary gleam"[12] of childhood has faded, that the "Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy".[13] However, these two poems

both differ from "Acquisition of Love" in that they both retain a sense that human nature, though flawed, is nevertheless somehow of divine origin. They retain a frame of reference within which man may validate his existence by positing its connection to some power which elevates him above the rest of nature. In contrast, "Acquisition of Love" struggles to undermine this view. Human character is explored not as some divinely bestowed gift, as some unique and individual endowment, but rather as something which has been rigidly limited and determined by inexorable biological laws.

It is at this point that it is interesting to recall the idea of heroism, directly introduced into the poem through the imagery of the sun. The sun, Cirlot explains, represents "the moment...when the heroic principle shines at its brightest"(317). On the one hand "Acquisition of Love" recognises this concept of heroism or self-esteem to be vital. The children appear encircled by the sun's corona. They live and die within its boundaries. Society's structures, the vehicle for earthly heroism, ring man around as inevitably as the sunlight. On the other hand, the poem seeks to explore behind this constructed hero system. It works to undermine that Platonic thought which considers life to be validated through some transaction with the divine, with that which lies beyond conscious conceptualisation. Prynne's poem reveals the development of individual character to be a product, not of some unique soul or divine inheritance, but of a societal system which creates the environment for man's belief in his own uniqueness and individuality. Even in the opening sentence the sun's coronal ring, symbolic of the heroic principle, is described as a "display", a "show [or] ostentation"(OED). The poem suggests that earthly heroism, that which gives man a sense of his cosmic importance, is a mere outward facade.

A human sense of uniqueness is not some metaphysical gift. It is not, as Wordsworth writes, a "cloud of glory" which man trails from "God, who is [his] home".[14] Rather it is a value inherited and learnt

from earthly surroundings. To "watch", to "keep (a person or a thing) in view"(OED), implies a consciousness of self defined in distinction from another. A child, the poem suggests, acquires his sense of self not from any transactions with the transcendent, but rather by defining himself against others, by watching them.

A child is a socially determined creature:

> each child is the fringe
> and he advances at just that blinding
> gradient.

The word, "each", as it means "every (individual of a number) regarded or treated separately"(OED), points towards that sense of uniqueness so crucial to man as a symbolically-constituted, self-conscious being. Yet the poem describes "each" child as "the fringe", where to be at the fringe may be interpreted as to be marginalised. "Acquisition of Love" gestures towards a view in which a child may be regarded as a piece of "irrelevant matter"(OED).

Contextually the word "fringe" offers itself to further interpretation as a "band or strip of contrasting brightness or darkness produced by the diffraction or interference of light, and usually seen as one of a series"(OED). On one level this definition accords with a naturalistic interpretation of the poem in so far as the children, standing silhouetted around the narrator, form a fringe at the convergence point of the sun's rays. However, the image simultaneously introduces the idea that "each" child is just "one of a series". Each individual is just one of the species of mankind. A human sense of uniqueness is undermined.

The child's "advance", his development as he grows towards adulthood, towards the mature state of the man mending the mower in the centre of the ring, is precisely defined: "he advances at just that blinding / gradient". The exactitude of the path is emphasised. Development of the ego, the poem suggests, is rigidly determined

within societal systems which construct the codes through which self-esteem may be gained.

The poem struggles to see beyond these systems, yet acknowledges that it may never do so. Man cannot step out of his shoes as a creature formed within these systems, to observe himself objectively. There is no way to transcend the limits of the human condition or to change the psychological structures which make humanity possible. Indeed, psychology explains, a child is partially conditioned even before he can manipulate symbols. He is formed without being able to put any distance between himself and what is happening to him. The result is that he acts out his hero system automatically and uncritically for the rest of his life. For man to try and look objectively at the systems within which he lives is like looking into the sun. It is "blinding". There is a strong sense of irony in the juxtaposition of this adjective against the verb, "watch". Though the child watches, and by watching learns, he will never to learn to "see" in the symbolic sense in which (Cirlot(99) explains), to see is to apprehend spiritually, nor will he learn to "see" with that clear vision which would allow him to apprehend his nature set free from the structures which give his life meaning.

"Acquisition of Love" tries to pierce accepted systems of meaning. The mower is broken. Orthodox structures of belief have become inadequate. In traditional diagrams of the cosmos, Cirlot writes, the "central space is always reserved for the Creator, so that he appears as if surrounded by a circular...halo"(40). To leave the circumferance for the centre is to move from "form to contemplation, from multiplicity to unity"(40). The mystic centre, Cirlot goes on to say, reveals the "primordial 'paradisal state' to man and...teach[es] him to identify himself with the supreme principal of the universe"(40). In "Acquisition of Love", however, these traditional ideologies no longer serve to order the world. The central space in the sun's coronal halo is occupied not by the divine Creator, but by a man trying to mend a broken mower.

The significance of this emerges when one considers the relationship between the man and the children. The children "advance" towards him, where to travel inwards, Cirlot(40) explains, is to progress towards one's inner self, to find one's individual identity. The poem implies that the child's inner-being is given form and identity, not by some spiritual infusion, but by man. His personality is determined by his cultural surroundings.

The poem goes on to explore this idea:

> As I try to mend the broken
> mower, its ratchet jammed somewhere
> inside the crank-case.

The ratchet, the teeth on the rim of a wheel, have become "jammed" into the cog with which they interact. The mechanical image provides an apt metaphor for the relationship between parent and child and, by extension, between man and his society. The crank shaft of an engine is the main shaft which drives it, and hence, in the context of this poem, could be interpreted as that motive which drives the whole system of human thought. Once this driving motive was a belief in the transcendent, in the divine origin of the human soul. Now this ratchet is "jammed". The mower is broken. The purpose of Prynne's poem is to try to mend it. To look for a new set of values through which man might justify his existence.

The key to mending this hero system lies not without in some transcendent sphere, but within man himself. It lies "inside the crank case", although exactly where the narrator is still uncertain. The adverb, "somewhere", is deliberately vague.

However, as the next lines of the poem suggest, even to become aware that the mower is broken is somehow to become aware of oneself and one's modes of functioning. It is to have the self-consciousness which one normally takes for granted, reaffirmed. "As I try to mend the

broken / mower", the narrator says, "I feel the / blood all rush in a separate spiral".

Bending down to look at the machine, the narrator feels the giddy rush of blood to his head. This image expands to encompass the fundamental paradox of human existence. To "feel" something, to "be conscious of"(OED) it, is a reaffirmation of subjectivity in so far as it is a reaffirmation of consciousness. The image of blood, traditionally representative of identity, reinforces this. To "feel the / blood" is to become conscious of one's own distinctive individuality.

In saying that he feels his blood "all rush in a separate spiral", the narrator further gestures towards his sense of his own uniqueness, of himself as "separate", "withdrawn from others"(OED). The forceful use of the word, "all", joins with the onomatopoeic sibilance of the phrase to dramatise the way in which man's whole being seems awash with, flooded by, convictions of individuality.

However, even as man is infused with a sense of individuality, he knows himself simultaneously to be an animal, identical to any other creature of the species. The juxtapostion of the words "all" and "separate", coupled with the image of the spiral which, Cirlot writes, symbolises "the relationship between unity and multiplicity"(305), forms an apt image of this existential dilemma. The poem suggests that man's "blood", his essence and identity, is precisely his paradoxical nature.

This essential human paradox is passed down from man to man, from parent to child, as much a part of inherited nature as any physical characteristic:

> I feel the
> blood all rush in a separate spiral,
> each genetically confirmed in the
> young heartlands beyond.

The adverb, "genetically", may mean either: "with respect to genesis or origin", or "by the agency of genes"(OED). In the former sense the

word would seem to evoke those cultural myths through which man posits himself as the special creation of a God. The imagery of the spiral might be seen to support this. A spiral, Cirlot(306) explains, may symbolise the creative breath of life and the spirit, and as such it would seem to recall the biblical account of the creation of man, the story of God breathing life into Adam. However, the alternative definition, "by the agency of genes", evokes scientific rather than transcendental notions. It suggests that there is no such thing as primary creation. Only replication. In this sense the spiral would seem to evoke the D.N.A. polymer, the double stranded helix whose codified series of nucleotides, by specifying the amino acid sequences of proteins, ultimately programmes the structure and metabolic activity of a replicate cell or organism. These two contrasting views, the one, spiritual, endowing man with a necessary sense of primary purpose and value, the other biological, reminding man that he is nothing but an evolved ape, mirror the existential enigma of the human situation.

This enigma is succinctly reflected in Prynne's choice of the words, "confirmed" and "heartlands". The former may be defined as to "strengthen spiritually"(OED). In the Christian church confirmation is a sacrament in which a young person, anointed with oil, enters into spiritual responsibility for his own faith. However, at the same time, "confirmed", evokes the concept of genetic confirmation, thus asserting modern scientific theories of genetical inheritance and evolution against traditional myths of divine origin.

Similarly, the noun, "heartlands", in so far as it alludes to the heart, to the seat of the emotions rather than the intellect, and more specifically the seat of love, suggests that a human sense of uniqueness is "confirmed" in some deep and heartfelt way. However, another sense of "heartlands", that in which it may be taken to mean "a "central region of homogenous...character"(OED), counteracts this idea of individuality. A child, this latter sense implies, is nothing more than a

uniform field, printed according to his genetical inheritance.

The dual connotations of these words are subtly intertwined, spiralling round each other with such complexity that it becomes as hard to extricate one strand of meaning from the other as it is difficult for man to unravel the naked reality of biological life from the codifications of the society within which this life is endowed with meaning.

For man to see his life as it really is is a terrifying and devastating experience. As Prynne writes in "The Ideal Star Fighter": "the stable end-product is dark / motion, glints of terror the final inert / residue"(164). It is this fear which he now goes on to express in "Acquisition of Love":

> The curious
> ones have their courses set towards
> fear and collapse.

The "curious ones", those who want to investigate naked reality, to understand what it is to live without illusion, are set for "fear and collapse". Man's ego, psychologists say, is built up in an effort to avoid anxiety, to avoid the fearful knowledge that life is without significance. To be "curious" would be to try and look through the defenses of the ego. It would lead man to mental "collapse", to the psychological illness which, Freud explains, is caused by man's fear of knowledge of himself and his own trembling impotence in creation.

In so far as the "curious ones" could be interpreted as an allusion to the whole of mankind, the poem would seem to suggest that to be human is to be necessarily subject to this existentialist fear, to the frightening knowledge that man as a biological machine will one day break down. An animal exists in a world of unconscious instinctive functioning. The "aimless beasts / mean what they do"(228), writes Prynne in "Again In The Black Cloud". However, to be "curious", "desirous of seeing or knowing; eager to learn"(OED), is to be conscious and hence to be human.

These "curious ones" have their "courses set". The path along which character develops is rigidly determined. Human personality, the poem suggests, is a product of a purely mechanistic function. The children's faces, "switch on and / off". The thought that governs expression is controlled by some binary mechanism. This idea is reflected in Prynne's "Thanks For The Memory" in which the faculty of memory is presented as the product of a series of neurochemical signals passed from "transmitter" to "receptor"(218). Now, in a similar way, Prynne implies that the nervous stimuli which give rise to human reaction, and hence to human expression, are merely the product of a transmission of impulses across a network of neurones through the ionisation of the synaptic fluid, in other words, through the "switch[ing] on and / off" of electrical charge.

Seeming manifestations of uniqueness are no more than the products of biological programming:

> it is not any image of learning
> but the gene pool itself defines these
> lively feelings.

The ego evolves as the child learns to organise his perceptions. He progresses through different levels of mastery and training until he is no longer considered a mere biological organism but a social being with an individual character. This process of socialisation is the creation of a new type of being, it is the formation of a human being out of animal matter. Learning is, therefore, crucial to the creation of a unique and meaningful personality. However, "Acquisition of Love" suggests, to see learning in this way is merely to see an "image", an illusion. Learning is nothing but an inherited characteristic. It is the gene pool, "the stock of different genes in a breeding population"(OED), which characterises man. The statement is emphatic. It is not any mystic essence, but a genetical inheritance, which gives man his special sense

of identity.

However, even whilst recognising this the poem simultaneously acknowledges that man is necessarily inscribed within the systems through which he constructs the images which give meaning to his life. Circumscribed by the structures of consciousness he can never step beyond their boundaries to view himself with total objectivity. This is affirmed in the description of "lively feelings". Feeling, writes Reid, "is a term preferable to consciousness...in so far as the latter does not mark so well the simplicity, ultimacy, and incomprehensability of our original apprehensions".[15] To talk about feelings would seem to be to talk about something deeply rooted in man's nature. "Acquisition of Love" suggests that a human sense of distinctive individuality is fundamental. It is "lively" in the sense that it is "vivid, intense"(OED). Man's feeling that he may, through "learning", reach beyond his animal nature, is deeply embedded in his psyche. It is a feeling which is so lively, so "life-like"(OED), that it becomes man's very life. The image becomes truth. As Prynne explains in "A New Tax on the Counter-Earth":

> what
> was said to be true was so
> because said ur-
> gently - and when imitated by
> lazy charade the truth became optional, al-
> ternative to the grand stability of
> dream: (172)

The image or "dream", because it is reassuring or "stable", comes to have priority over truth. It is easier for man to believe in the uniqueness of his human consciousness, Prynne suggests, than it is for him to face the naked fact that he is nothing but the product of genetical programming. It is thus, "A New Tax on the Counter-Earth" suggests, that man makes: " 'the transit from drive organisation / to cognitive process' "(172).

It is with this knowledge that the narrator of "Acquisition of Love"

reaches more nearly towards an ontological understanding of the human situation. He removes the casing of the mower.

> I get the casing off,
> sitting on the flat stone slab by the
> front door.

The poem is gradually uncovering the fictions by which man maintains his self-esteem. Now the narrator has removed the casing, he can see the main shaft of the engine, the crank which turns the whole mechanism. The driving motives of human nature are revealed.

It is significant that the narrator is sitting on the "flat stone slab by the / front door". Stone, Cirlot writes, is "a symbol of being, of cohesion and harmonious reconciliation with self"(313). Thus, the fact that the speaker of the poem gets the casing off whilst sitting on a stone, suggests that in looking inwards into the human psyche he is reaching towards some sort of understanding, and hence reconciliation, of human dilemmas.

The durability and hardness of stone means, explains Cirlot, that it stands as "the antithesis to biological things subject to the laws of change, decay and death"(313). It is a symbol of permanency. "Acquisition of Love" suggests, therefore, that that insight into humanity which the narrator now uncovers is an enduring one. Though the individual being may "rise and fall", basic human nature, passed genetically from one creature to the next, is immutable. It is not the so called individual which matters, the personality which vanishes with death. Rather, what is important is the fact that this personality or character arises in response to something deeper, more fundamental. It arises in response to the paradoxical essence of man. This, the poem suggests, is durable as stone. The stone age was the first age of man, and man has remained, at root, unchanged since that age.

Despite this, however, man is so possessed by his hero systems, by

his need for the mythical beliefs through which he attains his sense of self-esteem, that it is hard for him to see outside them. He looks for symbolic significations: "[Y]ou would think fortunes / could be born here". Rather than seeing destiny as genetically determined, man would like to think that it could be controlled by "chance...or luck"(OED), or by some transcendent power in so far as Fortune is often personified as a goddess with the power to distribute the lots of life according to her own humour. However, the uses of the conditional tense suggest that this isn't so. Man "would" think that fortune "could" be born. The fact that he is inscribed within illusions "would" lead him to believe that there "could" be a simple creation, a birth rather than a genetic replication. Man needs to believe these things because he needs to give his life meaning. The word "would", in so far as it forms the provisional tense of "will", suggests, perhaps, that man actively and consciously channels his thoughts along these lines.

The narrator moves on to blunt contradiction: "and you would / be wrong". The verbs "think" and "be" stand in contrast to one another. What one "thinks" could be an illusion, but what one "is" is an inalienable fact. Man is not subject to whimsical fortune. He is genetically predetermined. The wheel of Fortune, the emblem of vicissitude, is usurped by images of cogs whose interlocking mechanisms represent an inexorable, mechanical control of human destiny.

The next lines of the poem reaffirm this: "Their childish assertion is / bleeding into the centre". An "assertion", an "insistence upon a right or claim"(OED), implies a capacity for freedom of mind and self-control. This sense is reaffirmed by an alternative definition of "assertion" as the "action of setting free, liberating" (OED). However, the adjective, "childish", deftly undermines this. Although in its most literal sense it may mean "belonging to a child"(OED), it has other connotations which suggest, not only that personal freedom is the

illusion of an immature mind, but also that it is in some way puerile.

Man is rigidly determined. The children are "bleeding into the centre". The poem alludes, perhaps, to the processes of development of the human ego. As psychological theory explains, if the ego gives man self-control and assertion, it does so paradoxically by taking control away from the individual creature. The animal not only loses its instinctive centre within itself, but also becomes split against itself. A child establishes himself as the object of others before becoming an executive subject. Man has to unite his own perceptions with the attitudes of others before he can fully perceive. He derives his identity from his social environment. The imagery of blood is significant. If, as was earlier suggested, blood may be seen as a mark of personal identity, then this identity, the poem now recognises, comes from and returns to the "centre", the central gene pool of mankind.

The poem goes on: "we are determined / that they shall do this". Man is "determined" in that he is "limited" or "restricted"(OED) both physically and mentally. A man is both a symbolic self and a physical body. The former represents his freedom of thought and the infinite reach of his imagination. The latter represents his limitation. Man's idea of his own unique freedom is constantly dragged back by his sense of his body so that both mind and body are "determined" in the sense that they are not only "restricted"(OED) but "defined"(OED) by this restriction. To be human is to be defined by the paradoxical fact that one's sense of mental freedom is necessarily "determined".

This insight is developed in the next lines of the poem: "they look outwards / to our idea of the planet". Man's symbolic identity endows him with an almost god-like status. His mind can place itself imaginatively at some point in space and contemplate the universe. Yet, the poem suggests, man's view of his world is only an "idea", a constructed "conception"(OED), for he is "determined" in such a way that he may only perceive the illusions which he himself creates. He

needs the structures through which he creates his sense of meaning and hence he seeks to keep them in an active sense. Adults determinedly teach their children to validate themselves in accordance with the rules of society which they, the adults, have established. However, this determination is far more than an active desire. It is a necessity. To be determined or "defined"(OED) as a human being is to be inscribed within the symbolic structures which give human life meaning, within the "idea[s] of the planet".

This determination of man is not, as was traditionally thought, the product of some divine will. Traditionally man looks "outwards" towards the transcendent. The poem now implies that such notions of the metaphysical are merely a part of "our idea of the planet". When man thinks he is looking outwards towards that which is beyond him, he is, in fact, paradoxically looking inwards towards his own inalienable illusions.

Man may never be free. An adult controls a child's mentality in exactly the same way as his genetical makeup determines the child's physical characteristics: "Their blood / is battered by this idea", the speaker of the poem says. A child's identity, his ego, is "battered" or assailed by the ideas of the parent. His symbolic self is formed by the parent in the same way as his blood is physically "battered" or mixed with that of his parent's.

This parallel between the physical and the mental is furthered in the next lines:

> the rules for
> the replication of pattern guide their dreams
> safely into our dreams.

The poem would seem to allude to the process of genetic "replication" by which a living organism gives rise to a copy of itself. This process is governed by strict "rules". The triplets of nucleotides in

a dividing D.N.A. strand precisely codify the replicate chain. In a similar way, a child's mind is a programmed replica. Its dreams, its mental aspirations, are merely the acquired characteristics of a genetically determined human nature. The fact that the child is human, and therefore subject to the essential paradox of human nature, is the "rule" that directs the development of his character.

In this context the use of the adverb, "safely", is significant. It implies not just that replication "without error"(OED) which takes place in codified genetic reproduction, but, in so far as it may describe that which takes place "without harm or injury"(OED), it seems to allude to the manner of development of the ego. The human ego grows through the avoidance of anxiety as the organism banishes from itself that which threatens its safety. However, the rules for the safety of the child are established in interaction with the parents. The child is "guide[d]" by the parent. It is the parental "pattern" of thought which is replicated. The very concept of a "pattern", of an "order or form in things"(OED), undermines notions of individuality. It suggests that an individual is merely a part of the order or design of his species.

Human development is rigidly determined, yet this determination seems natural to man. He is scarcely aware of it. The phrase: "guide their dreams / safely into our dreams", with its onomatopoeic repetitions, long vowels and unvoiced fricatives, evokes a sense of smoothness and continuity. A child, it suggests, is insensate to the way in which his parents shape him. He can never dissociate himself from the process and view his development objectively. Character evolves within society. Man learns to want to do that which society says he must do. He earns his prestige, his self-esteem, in socially codified ways. "|W|e come back / more often to the feeling that rejoins the whole"(98), writes Prynne in "Thoughts On The Estérhazy Court Uniform". "|O|ur motives have more courage in / structure", because, he explains, the "sun makes it easier"(98). Here, the image of the sun

once more recalls the socially constructed hero-system so necessary to man. The two cogs of individual and society turn together, with the result that men willingly propagate whole cultural systems that hold them in bondage, and since everyone plays the same hero game no one can see through the illusion.

It is precisely this illusion which "Acquisition of Love" struggles to pierce. Through its analogy between man and machine it attempts to lay bare the real nature of the relationships between child and parent, individual and society, to show how they have become rusted together, how the "two ratchets / are both rusted in". The child is rusted into his parent. He is shaped to automatically follow certain rules in a world which automatically executes those rules. Socialisation becomes a kind of instinctivisation of the human animal. The semi-colon at the end of the phrase emphasises a stasis. Man's knowledge of himself, the poem suggests, like the mowing machine, has become rusty, "impaired by neglect"(OED).

The structures of belief through which man has traditionally justified himself are now, in a secular age, outmoded. "Acquisition of Love" examines the machine. It tries to rejuvenate the system, polishing it up to reflect the contemporary world.

> I file out their
> slots and brush out the corroded
> flakes with oil.

In the context of this poem, where the gradual dismantling of the machine is equated with the dissection of character, a coating of rust becomes an image of another of the layers which must be removed in order that the narrator might attain more closely to an understanding of man's inner nature. As he cleans away the "corroded flakes", those parts which are "worn away"(OED), he is, by analogy, brushing away all those symbolic structures which have become outmoded. The image

of "oil" is significant in so far as it echoes the earlier allusion to the sacrament of confirmation. In this ritual oil is used to anoint the heads of the faithful. Now oil is used not any spiritual affirmation, but rather to reveal that man is genetically confirmed.

It is only when the narrator has stripped down the machine, dismantled the psychological organ of the ego and brushed away the corroded metaphysical beliefs, that the poem can go on:

> They watch, and
> what they watch has nothing to do
> with anything.

The children are presented simply as creatures. They have no unique transaction with transcendence. Their actions have no ultimate purpose or individual significance. "What they do", the poem goes on to say, is merely an "inherited print".

Every activity, every action through which man feels that he marks himself as an individual, is not individualistic at all. The idea of the "print" seems deliberately to evoke the genetic print, that unique genetical make-up which marks the identity of its possessor. Ironically, however, this very manifestation of individuality is, as a "print", a mere reproduction. Furthermore the "print" recalls that idea expressed earlier in the poem in which man was shown to be necessarily inscribed within his images of himself. This image, the poem now suggests, in so far as a "print" may be defined as an "image or likeness stamped upon the mind or soul, especially the divine likeness"(OED), is man's illusion that he is in some way of divine origin, that his life is raised above that of the animals through some transcendental transaction.

The illusion is printed onto man by society. A child's identity, it has already been suggested, is developed in interaction with its parents. The poem goes on to describe how the children watch the narrator mending the mower because the narrator, by the very fact that he is

looking, has taught them to do likewise: "I lend it to them / just by looking". The verb, "lend", as it may be defined as: "to grant the temporary possession (of a thing) on condition ...of the return of the same or its equivalent"(OED), seems to gesture towards the fact that man is merely a reproduction of a type, interchangeable with any other member of his species.

A sense of uniqueness is simply an illusion bred by traditional symbolic values:

> & only their blood
> seems to hold out against the complete
> neuro-chemical entail.

Blood, as has already been explained, conventionally symbolises identity. However, this blood, the poem now says, only "seems" to "hold out". Individuality is merely an illusion, persevering simply because it is so very difficult for men to pierce through conventional delusions.

Juxtaposed against the idea of holding out, with its connotations of dividing off or excluding, the concept of completeness comes in strong contrast. As the narrator investigates the mechanics of human life he recognises the entirety of the "entail". Human nature follows a "fixed or prescribed line of devolution"(OED). Its characteristics cannot be bequeathed at pleasure by any one possessor. The child is denied the freedom to determine his actions. He is merely a link in the chain of being, a part of an "entail", a "necessary sequence"(OED).

This "entail" is "neuro-chemical". It is not only physiological but psychological too. Chemistry is a physical science which concerns itself with the forms of matter. However neurochemistry, the study of the chemical composition and processes of the nervous tissue, is directly concerned with the way in which the physical interacts with the mental. It investigates the chemical processes which lie at the heart of the transmission of nervous stimuli; the way in which the ionisation of

matter propagates the electrical impulses which control human behaviour.

The narrator again directly equates physical and mental characteristics when he says: "I guess their / capacity in pints". Capacity may be figuratively defined as "mental ability"(OED). However the narrator guesses the capacity of the child as though it were something to be physically assessed.

Human individuality, commonly considered to be manifested in, for example, the apparent uniqueness of facial expression, is in fact merely a biochemical feature, mechanically controlled by neurochemical signals passing across cellular membranes. It is these "membranes", "dream-like" in that they propagate illusions of uniqueness, which, the poem goes on to say, "keep their faces ready to see".

However, as the poem draws to its conclusion, it reasserts once more that illusions are necessary to man. Man may never completely free himself from them in order to fully perceive that truth which they veil. Rather it is only at the point when he is "ready to see", when he is prepared to explore into his human nature, that the mower works again and the poem may come to an end.

> The
> mower works now, related to nothing
> but the hand and purpose, the fear of
> collapse is pumped round by each linked
> system & the borrowed warmth of the heart.

On a naturalistic level the poem describes the way in which a working mower is related to the physical guidance of "the hand" and the mental "purpose" of mowing the lawn. On a metaphorical level, however, the lines provide an insight into human nature. In a contemporary world, the motivating force of man can no longer be some of relationship with the transcendent. Rather, that which drives man is instinctive action. A hand, Cirlot(137) explains, is a symbol of

action. Purpose may be defined as the "object for which anything is done...or for which it exists"(OED). A hand in association with an eye, Cirlot says, may also be taken to symbolise the "corporeal manifestation of the inner state of the human being"(137). This association is now gestured towards through the juxtaposition of "ready to see" and "hand". However what the narrator is now "ready to see" is that the "inner state" of the human being is interlocked not with some mystical beyond but with the biological functioning of the body, the instinctive action symbolised by the hand.

It is this instinctive action which keeps man going, which prevents him from falling into "collapse". Twentieth century society is troubled, perhaps more than any other, by existential paradox. The modern condition is one in which convincing dramas of heroic apotheosis are in eclipse. There is no embracing world view to depend upon or merge with, in order to mask creature consciousness. Man is subject to despair. It is social life, the obsessive ritualisation of control, which engineers safety by keeping him focussed on that which is immediately before him, on his immediate purpose. The defeat of despair, the poem suggests, is not so much an intellectual problem as a problem of self-stimulation via action and movement. Beyond a certain point man is not helped by more knowing. The only way to continue is to resume his action in a partly self-forgetful way.

The "fear of / collapse", as has been explained, may be understood to be the motive behind the development of the human ego. Therefore, ratification of one's sense of individuality is, the poem suggests, "pumped round by each linked / system". It is propagated by society, for, if in the context of this poem "system" is interpreted as the system of the human body, then "linked" systems may be taken to represent human culture and society. Man cannot live without a sense of self-esteem, without creating justifications for himself as an object of primary value within the symbolic world of society. Whilst he is alive,

whilst his heart is pumping, he must maintain this validation of his existence.

The "linked systems" in this conclusion to the poem are deliberately related to the concept of love. Love may be defined as: "warm affection, attachment"(OED). This "attatchment" is conveyed through the idea of linkage, whilst the "warm affection" is evoked in the image of the "borrowed warmth of the heart". Love, the poem suggests, becomes the fiction, the individual ideology of justification which in a secular age replaces declining ideologies of religion. Man purges his inner conflicts, his terrible existential dilemmas, through reaching towards the illusion of a perfect consummation with the other. However, as this whole poem has been concerned to illustrate, this notion of love is nothing but an "Acquisition". It is not some transcendental gift, but an acquired characteristic. The word "borrowed", as it may be defined as to "make temporary use of something not one's own"(OED), emphasises this. That loving "warmth of the heart" is not some unique and individual possession but something passed down through genetical heredity.

The poem concludes with the confrontation of human existential dilemmas. It acknowledges on the one hand that man cannot function without the fictions which endow him with his sense of cosmic specialness, whilst it recognises on the other that such fictions are merely genetically inherited illusions. Human nature is biologically determined and programmed. In realising this the speaker of the poem recognises man to be an animal in evolution who lives a series of paradoxes on which his distinctive humanity is based, and it is in confrontation of these paradoxes, the poem suggests, that the driving force of contemporary man must lie. In a Postmodern age, an age moving towards the refusal of all foundational thought, the traditional mythical structures which once endowed human life with ultimate significance and meaning, can no longer empower man. When at the

end the mower finally "works", the poem, I would argue, suggests that for an animal such as man, a distinctive, driving strength would lie in the ability to support the very contradictions and ambiguities upon which his human nature is based.

1. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), p.26.
2. Quoted by Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on the Problem of Man*, 2nd edition (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971), p.177.
3. Francis Turner Palgrave in *The Works of Edmund Spenser*, A Variorum edition, edited by Edwin Greenlaw, Charles Grosvenor Osgood, Frederick Morgan Padelford, Ray Heffner, 2 vols (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1947), II, p.629.
4. Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great, Parts One and Two* (London: Rex Collings Ltd., 1976), I. 2. 87.
5. See George Chapman, "Ovid's Banquet of Sence", in *The Poems of George Chapman*, edited by Phyllis Brooks Bartlett, (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp.51-82.
6. John Donne, "The Canonisation", *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*, edited by Theodore Redpath (London: Methuen and Co., 1956), p.16.
7. George Gordon Byron, "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage", IV, l.131 in *Byron: Poetical Works*, edited by Frederick Page, A new edition revised by John Jump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.243.
8. John Keats, "Endymion: A Poetic Romance", I, lines 806, 798, 810, in *John Keats*, edited by Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.81.
9. Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach", line 29, in *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold*, edited by C.B. Tinker and H.F. Lowry (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p.211.
10. William Wordsworth, "Ode", *The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth*, edited by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.297, l.4.
11. William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, edited by J.M. Nosworthy, The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare (London: Methuen and Co., 1955), IV. 2. 262.
12. Wordsworth, "Ode", p.298, l.56.
13. Ibid., p.299, l.67.
14. Ibid., p.299, l.65.
15. Quoted by Becker, *Denial of Death*, p.66.

A STONE CALLED NOTHING

Match the stone, the milk running in the
middle sea, take your way with them. The way
is the course as you speak, gentle chatter:
the lights dip as the driver presses the
starter & the bus pulls away to leave
for the moonstruck fields of the lower paid.
Gentle chatter, match the stone, we are
running into the sea. Pay your fare, have
the road beamed out:
nay, eat as much
bread as you find, and leave the wide earth
to pursue its way; go to the brink of the
river, and drink as much as you need, and
pass on, and seek not to know whence
it comes, or how it flows.
A good course
in the middle sea, we swing into a
long rising bend. The equinox is our line for
the present, who is to love that: the thought
dries off into the arch ready for it. Faintest
of stellar objects, I defy you and yet this
devastation curls on, out over the road. Are
we so in the black frost, is this what we pay
for as the ruined names fade into Wilkes Land,
its "purity of heart"?
Do your best to have your
foot cured, or the disease of your eye, that you
may see the light of the sun, but do not enquire
how much light the sun has, or how high it
rises.
The devastation is aimless; folded with-
out recompense, change down to third do any
scandalous thing, the gutters run with milk.
The child of any house by the way is something
to love, I devise that as an appeal to Vulcan, to
open the pit we cannot fall into. Failure
without falling, the air is a frozen passage,

the way bleached out, we are silent now. The
child is the merest bent stick; I cannot move.
There should be tongues of fire & yet now
the wipers are going, at once a thin rain is
sucked into the glass, oh I'll trust anything.

The babe when it comes to it's mother's breast,
takes the milk and thrives, it does not search
for the root and well-spring from which it
flows so. It sucks the milk and empties
the whole measure
: listen to the sound yet
we go on moving, the air is dry, I seem
to hear nothing. It is for the time an aimless
purchase, where are we now you say I
think or not /go on/get off/quiet/ match the stone.

CHAPTER SIX

A STONE CALLED NOTHING.

The world in which man lives is an awesome place. If man were to experience creation raw, if he were to see it in all its naked wonder, he would stand before it too awestruck to act. Lower animals are protected by their instincts, programmed perceptions that call into play programmed reactions. Man, however, is otherwise. He stands defenceless and open to experience. It is for this reason that he has to invent and create out of himself limitations of perception. Man protects himself by repressing from his consciousness that which overwhelms him. One "cannot repeat too often", Becker writes, "the great lesson of Freudian psychology: that repression is normal self protection, and creative restriction is man's natural substitute for instinct".[1] Man, in order to adjust to the existential dilemma of his being, to attain the kind of equanimity he needs to function in his non-instinctive world, builds up what the psychoanalyst Becker calls the "vital lie"[2] of character.

The whole of a child's early experience is an attempt to deny the anxiety of emergence. The child's character and style of life amounts to his way of using the power of others, of culture and society, to banish from his awareness the fact of his natural impotence. As Prynne suggests in "Acquisition of Love", man may never fully confront his impotence in the face of death, nor, as "A Stone Called Nothing" will go on to show, can he ever fully stand alone, firmly rooted in his own powers, to face the existential paradoxes of life. Ernest Becker, explains:

> the defences that form a person's character support a grand illusion, and when we grasp this we can grasp the full drivenness of man. He is driven away from himself, from self-knowledge, self-reflection...and toward things that support the lie of his character, his automatic equanimity.[3]

The last chapter of this thesis has discussed the vital role that culture and society play in human life. Their symbolic systems construct a stage whereon man can dramatise his sense of earthly heroism. Even for the modern mind, torn by existential paradox, the processes of socialisation can engineer a sense of safety. Indeed, as "Acquisition of Love" suggested in its closing lines, the only way that man can cope is to forge onwards with his life in a partly self-forgetful way. To press compulsively ahead according to the ways of the world that he learns as a child and in which he later lives with a kind of determined equanimity.

It is the sheltering function of society which Prynne's poem, "A Stone Called Nothing", now explores. It shows how man, living an automatic cultural life, protected by the secure and limited alternatives which his society offers him, can attain some sort of serenity. Becker talks of "the full drivenness of man" towards the protection of society (see previous page). This "drivenness" is aptly imaged in "A Stone Called Nothing" by the controlling metaphor of the bus journey. Man sits passively in his seat and is carried along whilst the path ahead of him is beamed out by the lights of the engine of society which this bus comes to represent. Following out the styles of automatic and uncritical living which he has learnt to live as a child, man can repress the pain of existential dilemma. Denying possibility, he can live in the passive neutrality of the normal cultural man.

"A Stone Called Nothing" may be read as a continuation of the arguments of "Acquisition of Love". It examines and develops the themes and ideas introduced in this earlier poem. However, it explores these ideas specifically in relation to a contemporary world view, in relation to man as he finds himself situated within a Postmodernist culture.

Postmodernism, as the introductory chapter to this thesis suggested, may not be succinctly defined. It has no single cultural identity. However, there is one generalised level of understanding through which Postmodernist movements may be approached. What all the different critical positions share, writes Patricia Waugh, "is a suspicion of subject-centred reason or

philosophies of consciousness".[4] Postmodernism, she goes on to say, broadly denotes "a development in thought which represents a thorough-going critique of the assumptions of Enlightenment or the discourses of modernity and their foundation in notions of universal reason".[5] Any struggle towards wholeness or unity of being becomes outmoded. Consciousness is cut adrift as Postmodernism moves towards a Heideggerean view of man as a being as radically *situated* as any other object in the world.

Without a system of foundational truth, Postmodernism expresses a world that grows increasingly shapeless. Attempts to resolve metaphysical dilemmas give way to an acceptance of the impossibility of making any sense whatsoever of the world as a whole. Acceptance becomes a key term. There seems to be a willingness to live with uncertainty, to tolerate a world of random multiplicity; even to welcome it. Man becomes a passive comsumer in a world of relentless commodification. Indeed, as Prynne writes in "A Gold Ring Called Reluctance": "The public / is no more than a sign on the outside of the / shopping-bag"(22-23).

Man becomes a subject of a Postmodernist mass society. No precise theoretical model exists for this amorphous society, explains Irving Howe. However, in an article in *Partisan Review*, he attempts some sort of definition:

> By the mass society we mean a relatively comfortable, half welfare and half garrison society in which the population grows passive, indifferent and atomised; in which traditional loyalties, ties and associations become lax or dissolve entirely; in which coherent publics based on definite interests and opinions gradually fall apart; and in which man becomes a consumer, himself mass produced like the products, diversions and values that he absorbs.[6]

It is the positioning of contemporary man within this type of culture which a "A Stone Called Nothing" broadly expresses. It explores the equanimity which the individual achieves by dissolving himself in the

faceless flow of a mass society, and examines its costs in terms of personal freedom.

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard gives a description of the "immediate man", of the normal cultural man who embeds himself within the security of his social system:

> the *immediate* man...his self or he himself is a something included along with "the other" in the compass of the temporal and the worldy...Thus the self coheres immediately with "the other", wishing, desiring, enjoying etc., but passively; ...he manages to imitate the other men, noting how they manage to live, and so he too lives after a sort. In Christendom he too is a Christian, goes to church every Sunday, hears and understands the parson, yea, they understand one another; he dies; the parson introduces him into eternity for the price of £10.[7]

This normal cultural man, however, is deprived of his individuality. A "self he was not, and a self he did not become",[8] Kierkegaard writes. His "immediate man" is what modern psychoanalysis terms, "inauthentic". He avoids developing his own uniqueness, he does not act from his own centre nor face up to the existential dilemmas of his being. He is one-dimensional.

Kierkegaard describes these normal cultural men as "Philistines", and for Kierkegaard "philistinism" amounts to triviality:

> Devoid of imagination, as the Philistine always is, he lives in a certain trivial province of experience as to how things go, what is posssible, what usually occurs...Philistinism tranquilises itself in the trivial.[10]

Philistinism leads man to accept a superficial life because, numbed by trifling concerns, he stands protected from the painful dilemma of existence. The Philistine trusts that by keeping himself at a low level of intensity he can avoid being pulled off balance by experience.

For Kierkegaard, however, to be a Philistine is to be sick. It is to live in "fictitious health".[11] The "true", or authentic man, as this thesis has repeatedly suggested, is he who, by realising the extent of his imprisonment

within society, dispels "the vital lie" of character and faces up to existential paradox.

"A Stone Called Nothing" is presented as an internal dialogue. The complacent but persuasive voice of the normal cultural man sets itself against that of the individual struggling for a full perception of the human situation. Although the poem begins with an ostensible recommendation of the easy flow of an unquestioning Postmodernist society, it moves on to represent that voice which finds such passive acceptance to be numbing. This voice struggles for authenticity, it strives to escape the Postmodernist society which surrounds it. At first it looks backwards, searching nostalgically for the old, antithetical values of metaphysical thought which once offered an ultimate meaning to life. It yearns for those definitive absolutes which, as Prynne suggests in his poems, "Concerning Quality, Again" and "The Common Gain, Reverted", can somehow give existence a position and significance. However, as Prynne's work has also been concerned to demonstrate, man is necessarily inscribed within his culture. This culture, "A Stone Called Nothing" now shows, is specifically that of contemporary Postmodernist society. It is a culture in which all notions of foundational meaning are denied. The struggling individual seeking a full perception of his human situation, finds himself confronting meaninglessness. Not only that of his animal nature, as it was explored in "Acquisition of Love", but also that of his own society, of the aimless superficiality of a Postmodernist world.

The search for authenticity leads to an impasse. The armour of character built up within, and protected by, the defenses of society is vital. To emerge into full humanness is to give up something restricting and illusory only to come face to face with something more terrible, despair. To see the world as it really is is a devastating and terrifying experience. It results in that very situation which the child has so painfully built up his character in order to avoid. It makes the security of routine, automatic, self-confident activity in the world of men impossible. It places a mere

animal at the mercy of the entire universe and the problem of meaning in it. It is this impasse, this impossible situation, which the struggling individual in Prynne's "A Stone Called Nothing" finds himself facing.

The title of the poem introduces the idea of nihilism, and with it some sense of awareness of those Postmodernist positions which negate all notions of foundational truth. In *A Note on Metal*, Prynne discusses the qualities of stone, and in particular those of its "cultic *inside*: the cave"(126). Now however, in "A Stone Called Nothing", this cave and the "magical...presences"(126) which it evokes are denied. They are "Called Nothing". The poem, its title suggests, is to refuse the possibilities of a religious or cultic meaning to life, it is to set them at nought.

Stone, de Vries(443) writes, is conventionally representative of unity and cohesion. In Prynne's poem, however, such symbolism is undermined. Even the basic integrity of individual identity appears to be negated. The stone is "Called Nothing", it has no name, no symbolic designation by which it may be demarcated as an integral entity.

Instead, stone comes to image a centreless Postmodern world which refuses all totalising visions and notions of fundamental truth. As the theoretician Hassan explains, Postmodernism may move beyond its sense of radical diversity, reaching instead towards a global oneness, towards the "one human universe"[12] which transcends all heterodoxy. "Difference is asserted and then buried in an assumption of universal harmony",[13] writes Brooker. Radical indeterminancy is confirmed in a process of play and reconciliation which outdates the old Modernist struggle for coherence and unity of being. It is in view of this, I would argue, that stone might be understood in the context of this poem as an image of that loose amalgamation which constitutes the faceless flow of Postmodernist mass society.

However, the title of the poem may lend itself simultaneously to an alternative interpretation. Stone, in being "Called Nothing", may paradoxically be seen to be called something. An identity is conferred upon

it, the identity of positive nothingness. The "Nothing" of the Mallarméan Absolute, for example, that "reality into which the poet finally enters and loses himself"[14].

It is never made clear exactly what it is that stone is supposed to represent, but I would argue that this doesn't matter. It is more important to note the ambiguity of the text as it concerns itself to resist definitive interpretation. The poem may be understood as an exploration of Postmodernist attitudes, of the idea that positions and meanings may never be fixed. "A Stone Called Nothing" consists of an internal dialogue, conflicting voices never at rest. There is, it suggests, no one, final answer to the questions it raises.

The poem opens with the command: "Match the stone". The definition of the verb, "match", is notably ambiguous. It may mean: to "encounter as an adversary", to "place in opposition or conflict", or, in almost direct contrast, it may be understood as: to "be equal...to correspond to...be the 'match' or counterpart of"(OED). However, this ambivalence initially remains only a faintest suggestion. In the context of the opening sentence the verb, "match", clearly instructs the reader to place himself into some sort of association with the stone rather than to set himself in defiance to it: "Match the stone, the milk running in the / middle sea, take your way with them".

To "[m]atch the stone" is to put oneself in alliance with an apparently positive force, for to match it is to match "the milk running in the / middle sea". Milk is traditionally seen as something good. A "type of what is pleasant and nourishing"(OED). Indeed, the aphorism, "as pure as milk", is used to describe that which is of "the finest and purest quality"(OED). If the stone is seen as a touchstone, testing quality or value, then to "[m]atch the stone", to "correspond to"(OED) it, would seem to be to attain the "finest and purest quality".

To attain this purity, however, it would appear that one is required not to aspire to some extreme or absolute state, but to adapt oneself to a

median "way". The adjective, "middle", implies that one should adopt a position of neutrality, a mean course. The image of the "middle sea" perfectly reflects this intermediary state. It recalls the medieval idea of the middle earth, the earth as placed midway between heaven and hell. The sea, too, may be viewed as a mesial entity for, as Cirlot writes, it is symbolic of "the waters in flux, the transitional and mediating agent between the non-formal (air and gases) and the formal (earth and solids)"(281).

The sea also introduces the idea of fluidity into the poem. It suggests that this median way is not rigidly directed towards a specific goal. Rather, it is in a state of flux. It is in a state of continuous change. The verb "running" emphasises this, both through its meaning of to "slide, slip, or move easily and freely"(OED), and through its definition whereby, as applied to the sea, it describes the "course" or "flow"(OED) of the tides.

This fluid, intermediary course which the speaking voice now advocates, is presented as a path not to be forged individually, but in the company of others. "[T]ake your way with them", the speaking voice says. The possessive adjective, implying a sense of individuality, contrasts with the plurality of the prounoun. A sense of joining together with others is picked up from the opening word, "[m]atch", which implies that one stands not as an individual, but conjoins in some way with others. This is subtly reaffirmed by the verb, "running", which, as it may be applied to "milk", has a dialectical meaning of to "coagulate... form a curd", and hence to "unite or combine" especially "in a moist or melted state"(OED). The softly alliterative, bilabial m's in "[m]atch", "milk" and "middle", and the fainter sibilance of "stone" and "sea", link the accoustic surfaces of the text into a flow of similar sounds, further gesturing towards this sense of things "running" together and combining.

The voice with which "A Stone Called Nothing" opens, would seem to suggest, therefore, that man should "take [his] way", not individually, but with society. The features of this society seem already to gesture towards

those which typify the mass society of Postmodern culture. The poem appears to advocate the loss of defined individuality and hence of the subject-centred reason characterising traditional thought. It suggests that man should align himself with others, merge with society in a culture presented as increasingly fluid, a culture with a Postmodernist scepticism towards fixed positions, and one whose median way abandons the antithetical values which formed the fundamental faith of the Metaphysicians. It is along this path, the voice now speaking suggests, that one should take one's way.

Man's journey along this "way" is not like that of the traditional quest romance. The movement of quest romance, writes Bloom, is "from nature to redeemed nature, the sanction of redemption being the gift of some external spiritual authority".[15] The poem does not gesture towards transcendence or point out a path to an absolute whose reality lies beyond the limits of human articulation. Rather, this "way", this course of life, would seem to be inscribed within language: "The way / is the course as you speak, gentle chatter".

A "way", as it may mean a "track prepared or available for travelling along"(OED), provides an apt metaphor for the vocabularies of a given language system as they exist pre-prepared and available for man to express himself in. Similarly, a "course", a "consecutive series"(OED), provides a suitable image for the sequential or combinatory relationships which a given language system permits. Furthermore, a "course", as it may be defined as the "action of running or moving onwards"(OED), would seem to gesture towards those Poststructuralist notions of language in which meaning is presented as being in constant flux. It may never be fixed, but is always shifting, flowing onwards in a process of endless deferral.

"A Stone Called Nothing", in evoking a view of language in which meaning, far from preceding language, is seen to be an effect produced by it, moves towards a recognition of the Postmodern condition in which man is implicated in a culture in which all knowledge is produced through

discourse. As Heidegger, a major precursor of Postmodern modes of thought, explains in *Sein und Zeit*, "*Dasein*", or "being-in-the-world", is grounded in language. The intelligibility of "*Dasein*" expresses itself, and can only express itself, in discourse. We live, writes Heidegger, by "*putting into words* the totality-of-significations of intelligibility".[16]

This language which inscribes man is not the language of Enlightenment rationality. With a Postmodern awareness that reason has failed, the current speaker propounds the "way" of "gentle chatter" rather than intellectual analysis. To chatter is to "talk rapidly or incessantly with more sound than sense"(OED). Chatter is talk "of a trivial kind"(OED). The speaker attempts to dissociate himself from logocentric assumptions, from the belief that language expresses some meaning which lies outside itself. Discourse is presented as superficial and trivial. The signifier, the poem seems to suggest, overwhelms the signified.

In its advocation of the abandonment of the old depth-surface model of interpretation, and its attention to the surfaces of language, this first verse paragraph of "A Stone Called Nothing" reflects a Postmodernist sense of the collapse of fundamental systems of truth and meaning. Chatter is not a mode of discourse concerned with definition and designation. Characterised by "more sound than sense"(OED) it is not concerned to define the "Stone", to call it something. Rather, the implication is that chatter lets the "Stone" be "Called Nothing". Instead of attempting to make sense of the world as a whole, to give a name to the stone, traditionally symbolic of unity, the poem accepts uncertainty, the amorphous flow of language which neither affirms nor denies meaning, but endlessly defers it.

The speaking voice which opens the poem not only accepts this superficial uncertainty, but appears to welcome it. The potentially pejorative associations of "chatter" are negated by the adjective "gentle", meaning "kind" or "tender"(OED). The "gentle chatter" flows like milk, like Shakespeare's "milk of human kindness",[17] perhaps. The adjective, "gentle", also subtly accords with the imagery of the "middle sea" since it

may be specifically used, *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes, to describe the smooth flow of waters. Furthermore, this gentleness is part of that median way, that moderate course which the speaker now advocates, for "gentle" may be defined as: "moderate in operation, intensity, rate or the like"(OED).

It would appear, therefore, that this "chatter" constitutes that median course along which one may "take |one's| way with them". It is concerned with communication in so far as it is concerned with aligning oneself with others. It flows like the "milk of concord",[18] perhaps. Indeed, this "gentle chatter" seems to gesture towards that which Brooker suggests is one of the most convincing descriptions of Postmodernism: that shift "into the heteroglossia of inter-cultural exchange, as idioms, discourse across the arts and academy, and across these and popular or mass forms, are montaged, blended or blurred together".[19]

To "|m|atch the stone", to attain some sort of global harmony, is to take that intermediate way achieved through the "gentle chatter" of a communication which recognises itself to be more concerned with the play of surfaces than with depth of meaning. To realise this, the poem implies, is to have boarded the bus. It is to be ready to start on that journey which represents man's voyage through life as he is swept along in the security of his cultural programming. The journey is an apt metaphor. The word, "bus", is short for omnibus, a word derived from the Latin, *omni*, meaning "all". The vehicle succinctly images the manner in which in society, and especially the mass society which this poem more specifically reflects, "all" men are carried along together.

The bus starts off:

> the lights dip as the driver presses the
> starter & the bus pulls away to leave
> for the moonstruck fields of the lower paid.

On one level these lines are, themselves, "gentle chatter". They provide little more than a naturalistic description of the familiar way in which the

headlights of a bus dim as the starter motor drains some of the charge from the engine's battery.

However, these lines also convey a strong sense of the passivity which characterises society in general, and particularly mass society. In mass society, Howe writes, "[p]assivity becomes a widespread social attitude: the feeling that life is a drift over which one has little control."[20] On a bus the passengers cannot direct the course of their journey. They remain torpid.

There is something powerfully enticing in this passivity. As the bus starts off it "pulls" man "away" with it. The metaphor images that which Becker describes as the "full drivenness of man" (see p.188 above) to integrate himself within society. He is driven away from the lonely questioning and self-reflection which lead to an awareness of human impotence, and towards society, the symbolic action system in which man can act out his feelings of self worth. As Becker writes:

> How sweet it must be to let go of the colossal burden of a self-dominating, self-forming life, to relax one's grip on one's own centre, and to yield passively to a superordinate power and authority - and what joy in such yielding: the comfort, the trust, the relief...the sense of being sustained by something larger, less fallible.[21]

It is the attractiveness of this submission which the speaking voice now evokes in its image of the "moonstruck fields". The moon, Cirlot(216) explains, may be symbolic of the passive side of human nature. As the moon draws the tides, so now, in the context of this poem, it draws the flow of the "middle sea", the bus load of society. This draw is presented as something bewitching. To be "moonstruck" is to be "affected in mind"(OED). The middle way of society allures man like a spell. The adjective, "gentle", comes to bear connotations of "enchanted... haunted by fairies"(OED). Indeed, "the gentle people" is a name sometimes given to the fairies.

The narrative refers to suburban living areas as the "fields of the lower paid". It evokes a conventional, pastoral idyll, and the "lower paid" are,

perhaps, subconsciously equated with traditional rustic figures, with the shepherds who live in rural contentment. Where "paid" may be defined as "pleased, satisfied, content"(OED), they appear "lower paid", not in the sense that they suffer relative financial deprivation, but in the sense that they are more easily satisfied.

The speaking voice runs smoothly on, its soothing repetition drawing the reader with it, lulling the questioning mind: "Gentle chatter, match the stone, we are / running into the sea". The pull of the trochees reflects the draw of society. There is a sense of inevitablity in the use of the present continuous tense. It is as though the individual cannot help but be implicated in society, drawn along by its smoothly pursuasive flow. The narrative voice is no longer addressing an individualised "you", but speaks in the unindividuated plural, "we".

As a bus conductor coaxes his passengers onto the bus, the speaker of these lines pursuades the reader on: "Pay your fare, have / the road beamed out". This introduction of financial imagery again seems specifically allusive to the values of a mass society. In asking the individual to pay his fare, the speaker asks him to give himself over, a passive consumer, to the commodifications of Postmodernist culture. If he does this, the poem suggests, his path in life will be "beamed out" for him. He will not have to struggle to find his own way.

The poem has run on to the end of the first verse paragraph. The speaking voice, the voice of normal cultural functioning, has seduced the reader onwards, pursuading him that he should take his way with the generalised flow of society, should embed himself in other powers so that, with his life mapped out ahead, he may exist with docile equanimity. However, although this voice is dominant, there lies behind it, nonetheless, hints of other contrary ideas, of counter thoughts struggling against its flow.

Neurotic structure is commonly conceived of as being built up of four layers. The two uppermost ones are the normal everyday layers. They are

those which, Becker explains, are formed through:

> the tactics that the child learns to get along in society by the facile use of words to win ready approval and to placate others and move them along with him...[they] are the glib, empty talk, "cliché" and role-playing layers.[22]

It is these superficial layers which "A Stone Called Nothing" would seem to evoke in its descriptions of the "gentle chatter" flowing in the "middle sea". However, psychoanalysis explains, it is only the limited and immature man who lives out his life without ever escaping from, or exploring beneath, these superficial layers. The vein of dissenting thought which undermines the dominant opinion of the first verse paragraph prepares the reader for the poem's later investigation into the third and fourth layers of the human mind.

The latent counter-argument suggests that there is an immaturity in the median way. It is "milk" which runs in the middle sea, and milk is "the appropriate food of infancy"(OED). Chatter, too, as it may describe the "incessant talk of children"(OED), is infantile. This immaturity leads to inauthenticity in man. In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger makes a relevant commentary upon the subject. His notion of *Dasein*, being-in-the-world, is grounded in language. However, Heidegger draws a distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity of language. Authentic language he calls *Rede*, a word which, Steiner explains, is less formal than "discourse", less colloquial than "talk".[23] Everyday understanding and self-interpretation come to pass not in *Rede*, but in *Gerede*. *Gerede*, Steiner goes on to say, is difficult to translate. Words like "chatter" carry moralistic valuations which must be avoided. Perhaps this a why the speaker in "A Stone Called Nothing" qualifies the noun with the adjective, "gentle". Steiner, however, simply suggests the use of the word "talk" as it conveys "the floodtide of trivia and gossip, of novelty and cliché, of jargon and spurious grandiloquence".[24] This "talk", Heidegger says, has lost its primary relationship towards the entity talked about, or else has never achieved such

a relationship. All that *Gerede* does is to pass the word along, it flows like "chatter" in the "middle sea". *Gerede* is at once a symptom and a realisation of the rootlessness and restlessness which govern a culture of inauthenticity. It is nothing more than that trivial chatter which Prynne alludes to so disparagingly in his poem, "A Gold Ring Called Reluctance":

> Sedately torpid, we inquire
> into our questions, the "burning issues"
> that "face us on all sides".
>
> (23)

Later in this same poem he parodies this vacant loquacity.

> Have
> you had enough? Do have a little more?
> Its very good but, no, perhaps I won't.
>
> (24)

"What dignity we avoid, as we / commit ourselves thankfully to these needs"(24), Prynne writes in "A Gold Ring Called Reluctance". "A Stone Called Nothing" picks up on this idea. For man to commit himself to the vacuous chatter of *Gerede* is for him to lose authenticity. To "take your way" with this "gentle chatter", with this inauthentic culture, the voice of dissension succinctly implies, is to make yourself "Nothing". In German, Steiner[25] explains, *Man* signifies both "one" and "they". This crucial indeterminacy dramatises the recession of true *Dasein*, true being-in-the-world, into alienation, averageness, and distance from authentic being. It is this idea which is now gestured towards in Prynne's phrase: "take your way with them". The individuality implied by the use of a possessive pronoun, merges and dissolves into the faceless plurality of "them". "Everyone is other and no-one is himself",[26] writes Heidegger. The " '*they*', which supplies the answer to the question of the '*who*' of everyday *Dasein*, is the '*nobody*' to whom every *Dasein* has already surrendered himself in being-among-one-another",[27] explains Steiner. Individuality becomes commonality. There is an effacement of identity. It "subsides to a 'oneness' within, and among, a collective, public, herd-like 'theyness' ",[28] Steiner

writes. This publicness is aptly emphasised in Prynne's poem by the image of the bus, a vehicle of public transport.

Further to this, the hinted recusancy which unsettles the pursuasive flow of the first verse paragraph, implies that to to succumb to the flow of society is to suffer from some mental impairment or delusion. It ratifies Kierkegaardian beliefs that to be a normal cultural man is to be sick. Though the adjective, "moonstruck", may describe the enchanting enticement of cultural conformity, to be "moonstruck" may also mean to be mad, to "suffer from mental derangment"(OED). It is hinted that to accept passively the equanimity offered by a collective cultural identity is to be damaged in mind. Never to look deeper than the superficial layers of the psyche is to be in some way diminished.

However, it must be stressed that these dissatisfactions remain, at least for the time being, only the faintest undercurrents. They scarcely even ruffle the alluring surfaces of the dominant flow. At the close of the first verse paragraph the passive way of cultural determination still appears strongly enticing. As the road is "beamed out" the speaking voice moves on into a sort of antiphonal response. The lyrical "nay", used not as a word of negation but as simple introduction, eases the reader into its pursuasive mood, enjoining man to eat and to drink, to content himself simply with the satisfaction of his bodily needs. The speaker praises lightheartedness, urges man to accept appearances, to practise a kind of ideal frivolity:

> nay, eat as much
> bread as you find, and leave the wide earth
> to pursue its way; go to the brink of the
> river, and drink as much as you need, and
> pass on, and seek not to know whence
> it comes, or how it flows.

These lines reflect that Postmodernist sense that reason has failed and that a return to the body is long overdue. Man should "match the stone", where the stone may be seen as the touchstone, symbolic, Cirlot(314) notes, of the body. The struggle for meaning has become outdated and man

should let himself drift on the sensuous surfaces of the world. He should take his way with the flow of that Postmodernist culture, which, as Eagleton describes it, is:

> confidently post-metaphysical. [it] has outlived all that fantasy of interiority, that pathological itch to scratch surfaces for concealed depths; it embraces instead the mystical positivism of the early Wittgenstein, for which the world...just is the way it is and not some other way.[29]

The images of bread and water are potentially rich in spiritual symbolism. In *The New Testament*, Christ, who offers redemption to the world, refers to himself as "the bread of life".[30] Similarly, talking to a Samaritan woman at a well, he says: "the water that I shall give [man] shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."[31] Water is symbolic of spiritual life, explains de Vries(493). However, in "A Stone Called Nothing", metaphysical symbolism is denied. Man, the speaking voices have suggested, should not try to apprehend some notion of ultimate truth. He should not "seek" to "know whence / it comes, or how it flows". Bread and water are to be consumed purely for physical sustainment. A sensuous rather than an intellectual response to the world should be adopted.

In a Postmodernist era the search for transcendent principles has become outdated. Prynne's poem seems to parody biblical texts. Christ, in encouraging people to pray, to search for the spiritual meaning of life, promises: "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and ye shall find".[32] Now, in "A Stone Called Nothing" the enjoinder to search is replaced by the persuasions of passive consumerism. "[E]at as much.../ as you find", the speaking voice says, as much as you "come across by chance or in the course of events"(OED). The tone of casual unconcern stands in strong contrast to the biblical command to seek. A contrast further enforced by the speaker's later direction: "seek not".

The narrative voice advocates that one should "leave the wide earth / to

pursue its way". The epithet, "wide", as applied to the earth, conventionally denotes the vastness of the world and, by implication, of all its wonders. To perceive the "wide earth" would be to stand open to the full intensity of life. However, the speaking voice suggests that man should repress such fullness of apprehension, accepting in its place the limitations of equanimity for, as psychoanalysis explains, the man who keeps himself at a low level of intensity can avoid being pulled off balance by experience. The idea of the wideness of the earth stands in strong contrast to that earlier description of the bounded "fields" and the narrowly "beamed out" road of language. Perhaps the poem means to suggest that the earth is "wide" in that it "deviat[es] from the aim, or from the direct or proper course...[is] astray in opinions or beliefs"(OED). To "seek" to perceive the wideness of the world would be to dissociate oneself from the restricted course of the middle sea and hence to go astray from the flow of society.

The verse paragraph breaks again and the narrative voice reverts to a description of the bus journey. "A good course / in the middle sea", the speaker proclaims, contentedly. "[G]ood", the most general adjective of commendation, aptly conveys the complacency of the middle way. However, as the sentence continues, broken only by the slight pause of a comma, there is a discreet change in register: "we swing into a / long rising bend".

The onomatopoeic "swing" emphasises this change in tone. It serves for more than naturalistic description. The speaker's attitudes seem also to "swing" around a corner towards new ideas. Though the transition is presented as a smooth, wheeling sweep, the stressed beats of "long rising bend" dramatise the change in register. The disturbance in the line introduces the possiblities of other energies; energies running contrary to the unreflective equanimity of the middle way. The bus, in turning around the bend, moves towards an unlit, unexplored area. Indeed, in traditional narratives of quest and pilgrimage it is at bends in the road that the protagonist encounters change.

It is significant that the road is described as "rising", for a rise would entail exertion and hence a break with the lethargy of the middle way. The voice of dissension, formerly so subtle, grows stronger now. The journey is gradually changing from one of passive acceptance to active quest. To go with the flow no longer seems enough. Man must actively seek beyond the surface layers of neurotic structure. The questing voice grows stronger as it begins to reach down towards the third layer of the mind. But this third layer is a difficult one to penetrate, for in piercing it man must confront that impasse which covers his feelings of being empty and lost, those very feelings which he was trying to banish when he built up the superficial role-playing layers.

The poem goes on: "The equinox is our line for / the present". The equinox, one of the two periods of the year when days and nights are of equal length, images the balanced equanimity of the middle way. However, the fact that as a "line" it must thereby prove a narrow course, implies that the speaker has undergone a shift in positioning. He now sees the middle way as restrictive. The phrase, "for / the present", is subtly suggestive. Although on the one hand it indicates that man has no other option but to follow the "equinox" in his present life, it introduces, on the other the possibilities of other times and dimensions. The poem hints towards the existence of some state outside the present, outside the dehistoricised world of Postmodernist society. It suggests that it is going to reach towards some other realm, the contemplation of which has so far seemed to be denied by the superficialities of a Postmodernist culture.

"[W]ho is to love that", a voice suddenly asks. The question slips in undramatised, a clause unacknowledged by even so much as a question mark. In contrast to the forcefully imperative tone with which the poem opened, this question appears at first weak and unassertive, a stray query slipping into a gap in the "gentle chatter". Nonetheless, its effect is disconcerting. The interrogative pronoun requires the individual to dissociate himself from the faceless plurality of mass culture. It asks him to

give himself a name, an identity. The voice appeals to the authentic man who is not afraid to face up to the conditions of his existence. It is the voice of that man who rejects the superficiality of the Kierkegaardian philistine and struggles to free himself from the tranquilising lethargy of triviality.

In his poem, "The Numbers", Prynne writes that, although "we tie into / so many voices", we must "elect the principal, we must take / aim", for to do this is to apprehend:

> the life, which
> is diffused, out of
> how we are too
> surrounded, unhopeful.
> (10)

Now, in "A Stone Called Nothing", a stuggling voice of authenticity evokes the notion of "love"; a passionate feeling quite out of accord with the bland equanimity of the middle way. Love, as the last chapter of this thesis suggested, has been elevated in our secular age to an almost metaphysical level. Notions of romantic love provide individual ideologies of justification. It is thus, in "A Stone Called Nothing", that the invocation of love would seem to break through the repression which gives everyday life its tranquil façade. In asking "who" would love the "equinox", the speaking voice questions the balanced equanimity of the middle sea. To match the stone, it seems to suggest, to match that median way in which all passions are levelled down, would be to have a heart of stone, to be an "unfeeling"(OED), loveless person.

However, the sentence does not finish with this tentative question. A colon leads on to introduce the observation that "the thought / dries off into the arch ready for it". A sense of hopelessness creeps into the tone of the poem now. The thought which has momentarily broken free, fades back into the "arch" which, as it evokes a church, would seem also to evoke the forms of institutionalised and codified religious dogma. Man's struggles towards metaphysical validations of existence are "dried off" into pre-

existent constructions. Depth of feeling is confined within dessicated and hollow structures. Though in struggling towards transcendent notions, man struggles for authenticity, looking for meanings which might validate his existence, these notions are denied. In contemporary society even man's queryings of the standardisations of society, become part of that very standardisation. Postmodernism denies the significations once offered by transcendental belief. It regards such beliefs as hollow and empty forms. This is the impasse which the speaker now reaches as he explores the third layer of his mind.

The struggling voice of individuality does not, however, give up immediately. Isolating itself from the numbing passivity of society, it fights against the mediocrity of the "middle sea". From beneath the passive veneer adopted by the normal cultural man, the desire for authentic humanness breaks free. The speaker matches the stone, but this time not in the sense in which he puts himself in alliance with it, but in the sense in which he sets himself up in opposition to it.

"Faintest / of stellar objects, I defy you", the speaking voice calls out. To defy is to "challenge the power of...to resist boldly or openly"(OED). It is to realise that the stone, that metaphor for the middle sea, for the way of mediocrity and passive acceptance, is "set at nought"(OED), is "Called Nothing". The equinox is referred to as the "faintest / of stellar objects", where faintness, as it may be defined as "producing a feeble impression on the senses or the mind"(OED), stands in contrast to the strong passions of love. To be faint is to be "wanting in courage"(OED), that courage which the defiant speaker now desires in order to confront his own potentialites.

It is significant that "faint" may also be defined as "spiritless"(OED). The balanced equanimity of the equinox denies the concepts of spiritual transcendence, those concepts by which man traditionally validates himself. In this context the image of a "stellar object" may relate back to that of the arch in so far as it evokes the constructions of the stellar vault. The codifications of religion are also faint, the poem suggests, feeble in that

they attempt to standardise the existential mysteries of man.

The passive flow of the "middle sea" is now presented, not as something which the speaker yearns to merge with, but as an object, "an obstacle"(OED) against which man must struggle. It is notable in this context that a stone (as de Vries(443) explains), may be taken to symbolise a difficulty or stumbling block. The culture in which man embeds himself is now shown to inhibit him. Furthermore, in the sense in which an object may be defined as the "end towards which effort is directed"(OED), to adopt the ways of society as one's aim, is now, it is suggested, a "faintest" object, a feeble purpose for man to choose.

Despite his tone of defiance, however, the speaker of the poem finds himself inevitably situated within his culture. The challenge: "I defy you", appears in a phrase unbroken by punctuation so that, in the very same breath as the speaker utters his defiance, he goes on to say: "and yet this / devastation curls on, out over the road". There has been an extreme shift in the register of the poem. The "gentle" flow of the "middle sea" is now represented as a "devastation", a "state laid waste"(OED). Its waves rise like tides "curl[ing]" over the "road" of human life and destroying it. To recognise that the middle way of society, that the defenses that man builds up against the naked reality of the universe, are devastating, is in itself a devastating experience. It is to confront the existential pain of man. It achieves the very result that the child has painfully built up his character over the years in order to avoid. It makes routine, secure, self-confident activity impossible. It makes thoughtless living in the world of men an impossibility. It places man at the mercy of the entire cosmos and the problem of meaning in it.

"Are / we so in the black frost", the speaking voice asks. It questions whether man, as he takes his way with society, is so trapped within a perilous condition, so inside it, that he can never escape it. Black frost is an apt image for this situation for it is both hazardous and invisible. Man's very nature, the poem suggests, is threatened by the tides of society which

sweep him effortlessly along in their cushioning flow, numbing his mind as frost numbs the senses, towards any more accute apprehension of his human situation. Frostiness is "coldness of behaviour or temperament, frigidity"(OED). It is significant that in *The Divine Comedy* Dante reserves severe frost as the punishment for those who have committed crimes against their own kind. Prynne's poem implies that to adopt the standardisations of human society is to betray one's humanity, to sin against one's own kind, against oneself, through the denial of that very struggling individuality which makes one authentically human.

Just as the eye cannot see black frost, the rimeless hoar which freezes the road, so man is so embedded within society that he cannot step outside it to observe it objectively. The speaker acknowledges the Postmodernist view that knowledge must always arise out of cultural embodiment. For man, necessarily situated within the world, knowledge and experience are inextricably bound up with each other and always culturally located. "There is no position outside of culture from which to view culture",[33] explains Patricia Waugh in her study of Postmodernism. There is no objective position from which one may offer a critique.

The speaker's tone of voice vacillates between puzzlement and bitterness:

> is this what we pay
> for as the ruined names fade into Wilkes Land,
> its "purity of heart"?

The financial imagery again alludes to the precepts of a Postmodern society in which man becomes a consumer, himself mass produced like the values he absorbs. But now the speaker's angle of vision has changed. Man, he suggests, in handing himself over to this society "pay[s]" a bitter price, he "suffer[s]...(a punishment or penalty)"(OED). To be a part of consumerist mass culture is to have one's personal authenticity wrecked. Through its financial imagery the poem implies that the value of human identity is made worthless. Subjected to the standardisations and monopolizations of

the middle way, man is denied the antithetical values which in former cultures gave rise to structured meaning and hence to the precepts of morality. An image of financial ruin evokes that of moral ruin. Thus, the poem goes on, the "ruined names fade" away, paling into the faceless mass of "Wilkes Land", a region of Antartica covered, the *Encyclopoedia Britannica* explains, in a "featureless ice-cap".[34] The imagery resonates with that of Prynne's earlier poem, "If There Is a Stationmaster At Stamford S.D. Hardly So", in which the "deep wells / of the spirit" are represented as "buried way under the ice". Whilst the "public hope" remains in this "darkened ward", this poem says, the "icecap will / never melt"(46).

Similarly, in "A Stone Called Nothing", passionate feeling, usually symbolised by fire, is replaced by a coldness suggestive of the loveless frigidity of a stoney heart. If, as the speaker says, Wilkes Land has a " 'purity of heart' ", it is merely because as an unbroken, stainless waste it is "unadulterated...unalloyed"(OED). The poem implies that in an unquestioning mass society intellects and emotions are undefiled by "devastation". Yet traditionally, "purity of heart" has come to mean something more than this. "|P|urity", unlike the earlier adjective "good", is not used as a generalised term of description. Rather it evokes some absolute quality and hence, perhaps, notions of transcendence. Inverted commas register a sense of irony. The well known words of Christ in his "Sermon on the Mount" are: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God".[35] "A Stone Called Nothing" suggests, in contrast, that man is so trapped within the unindividuated "purity" of Wilkes Land, within the bland facelessness of a mass society, that he is denied that transcendent vision through which he might validate his own life as an individual.

The speaker's question remains unanswered. It is almost as though such internal scrutiny is too much to bear. It is the soothing, lulling voice of normal, cultural functioning which now breaks back into the dialogue, propounding that one should not seek to step outside the culture which surrounds one, should not seek transcendental validifications of existence,

but accept instead the unreflecting superficialities of contemporary mass society. One should move away from active intellectual query and towards a Postmodernist acceptance of aesthetic and sensuous response. The long, flowing sentence sweeps pursuasively onwards, its firmness of tone coming in strong contrast to the tentative unanswered questionings which it supersedes:

> Do your best to have your foot cured, or the disease of your eye, that you may see the light of the sun, but do not enquire how much light the sun has, or how high it rises.

Man, the voice now speaking suggests, should do no more than the animal does to keep his physical person functioning. He should concern himself with the cure of bodily ailments so that, as an organism, he might experience comfort and expansiveness. He shouldn't seek beyond this automatic functioning for ontological understanding. The imagery of foot and eye is potentially symbolic. The foot, Cirlot notes, can be taken as "a symbol of the soul"(111). Lameness traditionally represents some defect of the spirit. Hephaestus, Wieland the Blacksmith, and Mani, all have deformed feet. However, in this passage of "A Stone Called Nothing", symbolism is negated. The speaker suggests that the foot should be cured, not in order to heal the soul, to satisfy yearnings for transcendental truth, but rather so that man, functioning in his capacity as a purely physical organism, might continue unimpeded along the road of life.

The images of eye, light and sun are also steeped in traditional symbolism. As Cirlot explains:

> The essence of the question involved here is the saying of Plotinus that the eye would not be able to see the sun if, in a manner, it were not itself a sun. Given that the sun is a source of light and that light is symbolic of intelligence and of the spirit, then the process of seeing represents a spiritual act and symbolizes understanding.(99)

The noun, "eye", puns upon its homonym "I". However, in saying that one should cure one's "eye", the speaker does not suggest that one should attend to some malfunctioning of individuality, or minister to an impaired spiritual life. Rather one should cure the "eye" simply because it is physical organ by which the organism sees the sunlight which brings growth and vigour. Similarly, one should not enquire into "how much light" the sun has, one should not seek spiritual illumination, nor enquire "how high it rises" where rising is traditionally metaphorical of approaching closer to divinity. Rather one should passively accept the standardisations of society.

This suggestion is, however, short lived. The speaker has recognised the "devastation" of the middle way, and complacency is no longer enough. The voice of struggling authenticity re-enters the dialogue of the poem. Although no direct answer was given to its earlier questions, some sort of conclusion appears to have been reached as the new verse paragraph begins: "The devastation is aimless".

This "devastation" is that of the middle way in which man, as a member of society, is trapped. It is that destruction which lays waste to the authenticity of a human sense of individuality. The negation of the antithetical values which traditionally gave form and purpose to human life, leave man "aimless", "void of aim or object"(OED). The amorphous flux of mass society seeks no underlying signification. It seeks neither origin nor destination, neither from "whence / [the river] comes" nor "how high [the sun] / rises". Man exists in a state of meaningless fluidity.

The tone of despair contrasts strongly with that of complacency which precedes it. Normal, cultural man protects himself from a full perception of existence through repression, a natural substitute for instinct. But, as the voice of struggling authenticity breaks out once more, the speaker seems to recognise that to live like an instinctive animal, is to deny one's essential humanity. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes an admonition to the Stoics:

> You want to *live* "according to nature"? O you noble Stoics, what fraudulent words! Think of a being such as nature is, prodigal beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without aims or intentions, without mercy or justice, at once fruitful and barren and uncertain: think of indifference itself as a power - how *could* you live according to such indifference?[36]

In "A Stone Called Nothing", the speaker seems to equate the Stoical ideal of submitting to nature with those deluded ideals of contemporary man as he submits to the passivity of mass society. Indeed, as Prynne writes in "Questions For The Time Being", there should be "*no* stoic composure". If man cannot step back from himself to understand that, inscribed within language, he "control[s] the means of production", a "hysterical boredom will result"(111).

"A Stone Called Nothing" ratifies this as it reveals that the man who seeks authenticity has nothing to gain from submission to mass society. He has paid his fare, but the journey is purposeless. It is "folded with- / out recompense". Folded like a stream or river, it "take[s] a winding course"(OED), aimlessly meandering through the world. The image appears to react against the Postmodern idea that all is "underwayness", that there is no final purpose to life, no ultimate meaning to be reached.

In the sense in which to "fold" may be defined as to "arrange (a piece of cloth, a surface etc.) so that one portion lies reversed over or alongside another; to double or bend over upon itself"(OED), the verb seems, more specifically, to allude to the Derridean theory of *différance*, in which it is proposed that the function or meaning of any one element of language is never fully present, but depends upon its association with other elements to which it harks back and refers forward. The surfaces of language double back upon themselves, folding and refolding, but without the "recompense" of ultimate meaning. The financial imagery resonates throughout Prynne's text. Man has paid his bus fare, he has made an investment in the company of mass society, but he now sees that this company has "folded", it has "collapsed"(OED), and there is no compensation.

The speaking voice has broken through the third layer of neurotic structure, it has confronted the impasse reached when man, having shunned the defences of society, finds only that he comes face to face with something even worse, with that terrible despair arising from a confrontation with meaninglessness, which lies at the deepest level of the mind. It is only by exploding this deepest layer, psychoanalysis suggests, that man may approach his authentic nature, that he may see what he really is without illusion or defence.

Postmodernist theories of the world suggest that there are only differences without positive terms. The antithetical values which gave the traditional world of morality its form no longer exist. As Nietzsche famously proclaims in *The Gay Science*: "God is dead".[37] However, not only is there no God, but there is no ordering principle either. "The total nature of the world is...chaos",[38] Nietzsche writes. In recognising this, the speaker's tone of voice in "A Stone Called Nothing", turns to bitter irony: "change down to third do any / scandalous things, the gutters run with milk".

Without a sense of positive and negative values, conventional ideas of order and meaning become jumbled and confused. Changing gear is for some strange reason, or perhaps for no reason whatsoever, analogous to a "scandalous thing". Anything may be described as "scandalous" in a neutral Postmodernist world in which there is no longer any fixed moral standard for scandal to subvert. In the gutter where effluent usually flows, there is milk. In Biblical mythology, God promised the exiled Jews an "aim", a "recompense" for their years of wandering in the desert. He promised them Canaan, "a land flowing with milk and honey".[39] Now, in a world deprived of the ordering of ultimate meanings, there is no promised land to yearn for. Even the "gutters run with milk".

The poem again seems specifically to reflect the characteristics of Postmodern society. There is, explains Frederick Jameson, very little in either the form or the content of contemporary art that contemporary

society finds intolerable or scandalous. "The most offensive forms of this art" he writes, "punk rock, say, or what is called sexually explicit material - are all taken in stride by society, and they are commercially successful".[40] The good and the bad, milk and effluent, are interchangeable. Man is caught in that meaningless world which Prynne images so well in his later poem, "Of Sanguine Fire":

> I'm buggered he
> says if I care I
> don't give a four
> penny damn or
> a blind fuck where
> soever and now all the
> mountain peaks sail by in handy likeness
> and pride & passion & moral precept/gurgle
> like the honey Outwash expected to
> run busily with milk. (175)

It is in the struggle to dissociate himself from this meaningless flux that the speaker of "A Stone Called Nothing" appeals to some eternal and infinite scheme of things within which his existence might attain some sense of meaning:

> The child of any house by the way is something
> to love, I devise that as an appeal to Vulcan, to
> open the pit we cannot fall into.

The passion of love is invoked as a means of escape from amorphous mediocrity. It doesn't matter to whom one extends one's love, the speaker suggests, it is simply the extremity of emotion which he yearns for. Love is sought as the saving grace of a secular world. However, the incidental phrase, "by the way", reduces this appeal to a muttered aside. It cloaks anxiety beneath a veneer of equanimity. As before, with the question: "who is to love that", the thoughts which struggle to disrupt the neutrality of the middle way, seem tentative and repressed. Nonetheless the word "appeal", as a "call for help...an entreaty"(OED), rings out like a cry of desperation.

Life, the speaker has recognised, is "folded with- / out recompense". Recompense may be that which is awarded by a court in return for some loss or injury sustained. The poem now picks up on this legal imagery. The speaker "appeal[s]" against the judgement. He looks to a "recognised authority for...a decision in [his] favour"(OED). The individual voice, the speaking "I", "devises" an appeal to Vulcan, a demiurge firmly placed within traditional centres of authority. A blacksmith in Greek myth, Jupiter hurled him from Mount Olympus to an underground cavern, and hence, in a Christian tradition, he is associated with the devil. By invoking the concept of love the speaker invokes also its binary opposite hate. By calling on Heavenly virtue he calls to the devil to open the pit of Hell. He appeals for a re-establishment of the antithetical values, the fixed positions and meanings, which once gave fundamental shape to life. Again legal imagery is used. To open may be defined as to "state (a case) to the court, preliminary to adducing evidence"(OED).

The speaker's appeal appears, however, to express little more than his own nostalgia for the lost rigours of belief. Man, as he flows with Postmodernist mass society, "cannot fall into" the pit of Hell, for such antithetical values are denied by this society. The tone of the poem reflects the desolation of world unstructured by metaphysical belief:

> Failure
> without falling, the air is a frozen passage,
> the way bleached out, we are silent now.

The lines are reminiscent of a passage in *The Gay Science* in which Nietzsche conceives of the world as meaningless and chaotic in the face of the knowledge that God is dead: "Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder?"[41]

"Failure / without falling", the speaker of "A Stone Called Nothing" now says. The financial imagery once more creeps in so far as "failure" may be specifically defined as the "fact of failing in business"(OED).

Human existence has been presented as contiguous with the consumerist surfaces of capitalist society, but this society, the speaker now suggests, is bankrupt. The poem alludes also to that biblical myth of the Fall of Man to which all human failure is traditionally linked. However, in a society no longer ordered by positive and negative values there is, as Nietzsche says, no "up or down left". Man merely follows a middle way. This way is no longer presented as appealing. It is seen now as a "[f]ailure", as deficient and unsuccessful. The speaker recognises a Heideggerean sense of the collective indiscrimination of mass society. Heidegger talks of *Verfall*; a term which Steiner translates as: "a cadence into decline".[42] This *Verfall* does not, however, amount to a quasi-secular version of the Fall of Man. It does not comport a moral value judgement. Rather, Heidegger explains:

> *Dasein* [being-in-the-world] has, in the first instance, fallen away from itself as an authentic potentiality for being its own self. It has fallen into the "world". "Fallenness" into the "world" means an absorption in being-with-one-another, insofar as the other is guided by idle talk, hunger for novelty and ambiguity.[43]

The speaker of "A Stone Called Nothing" goes on to represent the middle way of mass society as stultified and immobile, incapable of moving towards ultimate meaning. The "air is a frozen passage", he says, where air may refer to the "moral and intellectual atmosphere of the time"(OED). It may also allude to the "course" of speech. Air, the primary element, the principle necessity of human life, is, de Vries(7) explains, traditionally symbolic of the creative breath of life, and hence of speech, the Logos. However, as "a frozen passage" this air is represented as stultifying and immobile. In a Postmodern society, "passage", as a "transition from one state to another"(OED), is denied, for language cannot gesture outside itself to some transcendental beyond. Furthermore, the definition of "passage" as: the "passing into law of a legislative measure"(OED), reverts to the earlier legal imagery. The "appeal" made to Vulcan has been negated. The antithetical values of heaven and hell will not be passed into law. In a

consumerist society man's assets have been "frozen", they are "impossible to reliquidate or realise at...some other time"(OED). The "gentle chatter" which was the "way" is not that *Rede* which Heidegger presents as the speech of *Dasein*, the authentic talk associated with the Logos. Rather, it is *Gerede*, a vacant chatter. It does not beam out the road but bleaches it, drains it of colour and quality. The idea links back to that of the equinox as the "faintest of stellar objects" and to the image of the faded and ruined names. The "way" of man, as it is inscribed within a mass culture, is monochrome and passionless. Furthermore, in the sense in which to "bleach" is to make "pale with fear"(OED), the poem suggests that man, protected by society, fearful to face his own potential individuality, leads a "bleached out" life, a drained and insipid existence. "[W]e are silent now", the poem says. There is nothing more to say. Man falls into numbed acceptance.

A child, Cirlot writes, is symbolic of the "mystic Centre". Psychologically speaking it is "of the soul"(45). Now, however, the poem presents the child as "the merest bent stick". In the superficial culture of Postmodernism, deeper symbolic values are denied. The child is reduced to a mere cypher. Human life has no more significance than that of a dry twig.

In this Postmodern world the voice seeking authenticity feels that it has nowhere to progress. "I cannot move", the speaker cries. Acknowledging that all thought is inscribed within the middle way of language, the individual must recognise that he "cannot move" towards spiritual change but must remain trapped within the frozen passage of speech.

Although the speaker appealed for the opening of Hell, for the re-establishment of metaphysical belief, the only Hell he has found is that of frozen numbness. "There should be tongues of fire", he says, there should be a heat of passion to thaw the numb equanimity of a society which denies all antithetical value. Fire is a symbol of spiritual energy, Cirlot(105-106) explains. To pass through fire traditionally images transcendence of the

human condition. The tongue is also a reference to the speech with which this poem is concerned. There should be a language, the speaker seems to suggest, by which man could talk of extremes, of transcendental values. Yet the statement remains in the conditional tense. All man has is the bland mediocrity of linguistic surfaces. The poem reverts to a banal description of a drizzling rain which douses the flames of passionate apprehension:

> & yet now
> the wipers are going, at once a thin rain is
> sucked into the glass

The speaker appears to be more concerned with simple physical description than with any more searching inquiry. He succumbs, so it seems, to the principles of a mass society in which, as Howe explains, "reflection upon the nature of society is replaced by an observation of its mechanics".[44]

"[O]h I'll trust anything", the speaker cries. The words come less as an exclamation than as a sigh of resignation and defeat. In a Postmodernist world which denies all antithetical values, the fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is negated. Trust no longer has any firm basis on which to ground itself. Instead, "anything" will do. The speaker succumbs to passive indifference. He will put his faith in anything, and thus by implication in the "nothing" of an inert society.

The tone of resignation fades into a momentary silence before the antiphonal voice of complacency resumes its position in the poem. It equates the idea of the "thin rain" being "sucked into the glass", the bland mediocrity being imbibed into life, with the way a child sucks from its mother's breast:

> The babe, when it comes to its mother's breast,
> takes the milk and thrives, it does not search
> for the root and well-spring from which it
> flows so. It sucks the milk and empties
> the whole measure.

A child is a trusting reflex of its world. It remains passive and unthinking at its mother's breast in much the same way as man may remain passively within the protective bounds of his culture. Indeed, the poem seems to suggest, the baby "takes the milk and thrives" just as man, in taking his way with the "milk running in the / middle sea", should prosper. He should remain in his childish, immature state, never questioning, never seeking any origin or basis of truth. The evocations of "root and wellspring" resonate with those of other images in the poem. A "root" may be defined philologically as: "one of those ultimate elements of a language"(OED). Man's "way" in life, the poem has said, is the "course as you speak". Man, it has implied, is inscribed within language, and he should rest contented with its superficial flow. Indeed, as Prynne writes in "Questions For the Time Being": "living in hope is so silly when our desires / are...not part of any mode or con- / dition except language"(112). Man should not seek the ultimate source of this language, he should not strive for the Logos, the "well-spring" of the stream in which the milk of the middle sea runs. Rather he should be content with "gentle chatter", with the passive flow of a mass society. Like the child who "sucks the milk and empties the whole measure", he should remain an unreflective consumer. It is thus that he "match[es]" the "Stone Called Nothing", for to empty something is to leave it "containing nothing"(OED).

As the poem moves onwards towards its conclusion, the speaker realises that man is inevitably caught within the society which surrounds him, he realises that his struggling questions cannot ever attain to the ultimate meaning once offered by belief in transcendent truths. "[T]here's no / good in the brittle effort, to snap the pace / into some more sudden glitter of light"(47), writes Prynne in "In The Long Run, To Be Stranded", for the "stirring is so / slight, the talk so stunned". The voice which concludes "A Stone Called Nothing" does indeed appear to be stunned. It gives up the struggle and accepts the inevitability of the passive flow of the "middle sea":

: listen to the sound yet
we go on moving, the air is dry, I seem
to hear nothing. It is for the time an aimless
purchase, where are we now you say I
think or not /go on/get off/quiet/ match the stone.

Listen to the sound, the speaker says, drawing attention to the flow of his own dialogue. In hearing it he knows that he goes on moving, flowing with the amorphous plurality of gentle chatter, and hence it seems to him that he hears nothing for this vacant loquacity is that of the flow of mass society, of the "Stone Called Nothing". As long as the speaker goes on talking the end is deferred in some sort of self-generating hypertrophy of discourse which seems not to express any meaning, but to assert only its own existence. It is thus that, in a contemporary world, in "the time" in which the speaker finds himself situated, the time of a passive Postmodernist society, man's "purchase" or hold on the world is "aimless". Man has paid his bus fare, he has "purchase[d]" his passage, but what he has bought has been purposeless.

"[W]here are we now", a voice asks, but the question, lost in a flow of unpunctuated narrative, remains unanswered. Meaning, the poem seems to suggest, is a chain of signification, open ended and non-teleological, and there are no fixed positions within this faceless flow from which one may attempt to ascertain one's position objectively. The individual merges with the flow of society. What "you say" and what "I think" are paralleled and interchangeable. Even man's most secret self, his inmost thoughts, flow with the words of others. Whether "I think or not" seems to become a matter of no importance. The backslashes emphasise an utter arbitrariness. The poem reaches no resolution. It doesn't matter whether one gets on the bus, or gets off. Even in "quiet", in unvoiced meditation, man's thoughts seem necessarily part of the course of language, part of the aimless flow of the milk in the middle sea. They "match the stone" in that they pair up to it. The poem comes full circle. The commanding voice which opened it, cannot be negated. The speaking voice comes round to an acceptance of

that condition which Prynne describes in his earlier poem, "Questions For The Time Being". It seems to recognise that man is in "a given con- / dition", part of "the temporary nothing in which life goes on"(113).

However, for man to acknowledge his own aimlessness, to recognise that his life is meaninglessness, is, paradoxically, for him to achieve an ontological understanding. The speaker of this poem has reached an acceptance of his own purposelessness, yet he has not been passive. His vision has been arrived at through his desperate search for meaning, through the wrangling arguments of inner voices as he has got on and off the bus, as he has alternately flowed with, and dissociated himself from, his culture and society. Through struggle and discussion he has reached the deepest level of his mind, has confronted desolation and despair.

I would argue, therefore, that Prynne's "A Stone Called Nothing" could be considered to approach Kierkegaardian themes, to express that idea that the "self must be broken in order to become a self".[45] Kierkegaard's whole understanding of human character is that it is a structure built up to avoid perception of the "terror, perdition [and] annihilation [that] dwell next door to every man".[46] However, Kierkegaard suggests, if man faces up to this anxiety, if he confronts it, he finds the reality of his situation. Only by seeing that reality can man open a new possibility for himself. "He who is educated by dread is educated by possibility", writes Kierkegaard. When a man knows:

> more thoroughly than a child knows the alphabet that he demands of life absolutely nothing...[when he] has learned the profitable lesson that every dread which alarms him may the next instant become a fact, he will then interpret reality differently.[47]

It is this possibility which "A Stone Called Nothing" would seem to offer. Its arguments attempt to free man of characterological lies in order that, feeling himself truly lost, his life deprived of those structures which endow it with meaning, he can then find himself in a position in which he

may confront ontological truth.

The destruction of self, it would seem, leads towards the apprehension of some new reality. For Kierkegaard this reality is that of absolute transcendence, of the Ultimate Power of Creation. The psychodynamical progression is logical. A child grounds himself in some power that transcends him: his parents, his social group, the symbols of culture and society. This is the unthinking web of support which allows him to believe in himself. He functions on the automatic security of delegated powers and cannot admit that these powers are borrowed. He has denied his creatureliness precisely by imagining that they are secure. But this security has been tapped by unconsciously leaning on the persons and things of society. Once the basic weakness of man has been exposed then man will be forced to re-examine the whole problem of power linkages. He will have to think about reforging them to a real source of creative power. It is at this point that man will have to begin to posit his creatureliness *vis a vis* a Creator, a first and principle cause of all creation. Once man begins to look at his relationship to an Ultimate Power, to infinitude, and to refashion his links from those around him to this metaphysical essence, then man opens himself up to the horizon of unlimited possibility, of real freedom.

Kierkegaard's philosphical and psychological dissection of human nature ends up with the concept of faith. Amongst the ruins of the broken cultural self there remains the mystery of the private invisible self which yearns for ultimate significance. This invisible mystery at the heart of every creature now attains cosmic meaning by affirming its connection with the invisible mystery at the heart of creation.

It is this invisible mystery which, I would argue, "A Stone Called Nothing" could be seen to gesture towards. The image of the stone may evoke an altar, and as such it could be interpreted as being symbolic of man's transactions with the divine. In Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, there is the "grey Stone / Of native rock" which causes him to feel "Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself / And of some other Being."[48]

Similarly, in Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner", the "Wedding-Guest sat on a stone" to learn the final moral of the tale which is: "For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all".[49] Stone, it would seem, stands at the entrance to a transcendental consciousness, to an awareness of some divine power wherein man may attain a sense of validation and meaning.

In Prynne's poem, this stone may be "Called Nothing" in the sense in which "Nothing" can be construed to be a positive concept. Like the Mallarméan notion of nothingness alluded to earlier in this chapter (see page 194), it may come to represent some Absolute reality in which man may lose himself. The "nothing" which the speaker seems to hear in the final lines of the poem, could be interpreted as the nothingness of the transcendental, of that "sacred / emptiness"(121) which Prynne describes in "Chemins de Fer".

This absolute "nothing", however, may not be apprehended in language. Though man might feel that there is something else which lies beyond him, something utterly decisive, he can never articulate it. In "Numbers in Time of Trouble", Prynne examines man as he exists in a realm of the "standard", in "the second city of this middle earth"(18). "[N]o man has yet crossed / the plains", he writes, "we cannot / yet see the other side"(19). However, he suggests that to know that "we deserve to"(19) somehow amounts to an intuition of that which lies beyond us and the language which inscribes us. It is somehow to perceive those "few / outer lights" of a city which "is not yet known"(19). "A Stone Called Nothing" ends on a tone of quietness. It recognises that it cannot encompass ultimate transcendental mystery. The language in which conscious conceptualisation necessarily takes place cannot inscribe the Kierkegaardian leap of faith. The most that the speaker can do is attain some state of penultimacy, some state in which he stands on the brink of a transcendence in which he places his faith, but which he knows that, being human, he may never apprehend.

1. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), p.66.
2. Ibid., p.47.
3. Ibid., p.56.
4. Patricia Waugh, *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), p.2.
5. Ibid., p.6.
6. Irving Howe, "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction", *Partisan Review*, 26 (1959), p.426.
7. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 1849 (Anchor Edition, 1954, combined with *Fear and Trembling*), translated by Walter Lowrie, p.181.
8. Ibid., p.181.
9. Becker, *Denial of Death*, p.73.
10. Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, pp. 174-175.
11. Ibid., p.156.
12. Ihab Hassan, "Ideas of Cultural Change" in *Innovation / Renovation: New Perspectives on the Humanities*, edited by Ihab Hassan and Sally Hassan (Madison: University of Winsconsin Press, 1983), p.31.
13. Peter Brooker, *Modernism/Postmodernism* (London: Longman Group, 1992), p.13.
14. Quoted by de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.344.
15. Harold Bloom, *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p.16.
16. Quoted by George Steiner, *Heidegger*, (London: Fontana Press, 1978), p.92.
17. *Macbeth*, I. 5. 17.
18. *Macbeth*, IV. 4. 3.
19. Brooker, *Modernism/Postmodernism*, p.20.
20. Howe, "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction", p. 427.
21. Becker, *Denial of Death*, p.116.
22. Ibid., p.57.
23. Steiner, *Heidegger*, p.92.
24. Ibid., p.92.
25. Ibid., p.89.
26. Ibid., p.90.
27. Ibid., p.90.
28. Ibid., p.90.
29. Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism", *New Left Review*, 152 (1985), p.70.
30. John 6. 35.
31. John 4. 14.
32. Luke 11. 9-13.
33. Waugh, *Postmodernism*, p.5.

34. *Encyclopoedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information*, eleventh edition, 29 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), XXVIII, p.642.
35. Matthew 5. 8.
36. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973), p.39.
37. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), p.125.
38. Ibid., p.109.
39. Exodus 3. 8.
40. Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in *Postmodernism and its Discontents: Theories and Practices* (London: Verso, 1988). p.27.
41. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p.125.
42. Steiner, *Heidegger*, 94.
43. Ibid., 94.
44. Howe, "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction", p.427.
45. Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, p.199.
46. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, 1844 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), translated by Walter Lowrie), p. 140.
47. Kierkegaard, *Concept of Dread*, p.140.
48. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, II, lines 33-34, 31-32, in *William Wordsworth*, edited by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.393.
49. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Ancient Mariner", I, l.17, and VII l.104, in *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Derwent and Sara Coleridge, London: Edward Moxon & Co., 1863), p.94.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DOWN WHERE CHANGED

The five poems which I have so far chosen to examine have all been shown to be quintessentially concerned with the disestablishment of foundationalist philosophies. Their texts undermine those orders of logic and rationality through which Enlightenment thought believed that a fundamental reality might be discovered. They manifest a loss of faith in the possibility of perfect and transparent representation, dramatising instead the idea that conceptualisations of the world may only ever be discontinuous and fragmented. Refusing the classical assurances of a clearly definable truth, Prynne's poetry registers a typically Modernist uncertainty about knowledge and its acquisition.

However, the poems discussed in this thesis have not completely abandoned all notions of representation. Though their texts are pluralistic and ambivalent, offering no one single meaning, no simple explicational gloss on a fixed and accepted reality, they nonetheless do not refuse interpretation all together. There is an underlying symbolic structure, an integrated referential scheme through which a flux of multiple relational meanings is generated. The texts gesture, through their fundamental coherence, towards some deep sense of signification. They retain some latent notion of organic unity. I would argue, therefore, that the poems which this thesis has so far considered, may be seen to be illustrative of what I have termed in my introductory chapter, a "high" Modernist poetic. It is rooted in practices which stem from the Symbolist tradition, from the poetic of Baudelaire, and before him, of the Romantics.

It is only when the idea of representation has been abandoned altogether rather than simply problematised, that writing may move

beyond this "high" Modernist episteme towards a Postmodernist poetic; towards an aesthetic which, negating all notions of mimesis, of organic unity or consensus, offers only a multitude of disparate perspectives, fragments which adamantly refuse to coalesce into any transcendent or more profound whole.

In Prynne's "A Stone Called Nothing", the voice of struggling authenticity, of the individual who seeks a full perception of his human situation, finds himself confronting the meaningless flow of Postmodernist mass culture. The speaker, recognising himself to be implicated in a society which has been deprived of those absolutes which once gave a purpose to existence, faces the depthless superficialities of a world in which legitimising metanarratives are denied. However, there is a broad gap between poetry which alludes to Postmodernist positions and a poetry which actually adopts their forms. "A Stone Called Nothing", desptite its confrontation of Posmodernist perspectives, is not itself a Postmodernist text. It is only with the next work which I would choose to discuss, Prynne's book, *Down Where Changed*, that the shift is made from a "high" Modernist, to a Postmodernist poetic; from an aesthetic which recognises and refers to indeterminacy of meaning, to one which is fundamentally undecidable.

In *Down Where Changed* there is no sense that the speaking voices may take up a position outside the culture in which they find themselves situated. There would seem to be no oppositional space from which a detached subjectivity may take a stand. Set adrift in the perpetual present of a Postmodernist world, of a superficial, centreless realm, replete with ever-new, ever-recycled images or representations, all sense even of a lost authenticity is abandoned. Truth, contiguous with the aimless surfaces of Postmodern textuality, can no longer be distinguished from fiction. Nietzsche argues in his essay, "On Truth and Lie in an Extramoral Sense", that "every concept is necessarily a falsification of what it purports to represent, for the world is radically

fragmentary and contingent".[1] Man can never be reunited with the world at some higher level of the spirit. The only reconciliation offered is that aesthetic shaping which knows itself, self-consciously, to be a provisional fiction.

The title, *Down Where Changed*, gestures towards the essential shift in perspective which this text enacts. Traditional systems of knowledge assume a stable depth-surface relationship such that a hidden core of truth may be uncovered and related to an apparently contingent surface. It is this notion of some buried meaning which may be excavated which previous poems of Prynne's gesture towards. "Bronze : Fish", for example, suggests that man can attain some sense of his essential nature, the "virtues / of prudence, the rich arable soil", when he reaches:

> back to another
> matter, only it's not back but
> down rather, or in some involved
> sense of further off.
>
> (57)

Similarly, in "From End to End" there is a nostalgic allusion to an underlying, fundamental truth. The "continued quality", the poem says (referring, perhaps, to that definitive "quality" which has been sought in the earlier poem "Concerning Quality, Again"), is "turned down, / pointed into the earth"(61). Equally in "In the Long Run To Be Stranded", Prynne writes that there is "down there / in the snow, too, the loyal city of man"(47).

Down Where Changed has an epigraph taken from C. Thorpe's *Practical Crystal Gazing* which picks up on this traditional nostalgia for fundamental positions, for metanarratives which may legitimate all foundations for truth. It suggests that man might discover and understand some deep level of meaning, that he might apprehend some ultimate "reality".

> Anyone who takes up this book, will, we expect, have done so because at the back of his mind he has a half formed belief that there is something in it.

The poems previously discussed in this thesis seem to cling to this belief "that there is something in it". Whilst recognising experience to be discontinuous and unrationalisable, they nonetheless set this recognition off against a concern with abstraction as the possibility of creating a coherent, autonomous aesthetic form which may yet discover some mode of correspondence with an Order of the Real outside its own constructions. The poems have suggested that there is some fundamental reality, some meaning which might validate existence.

Now, however, in *Down Where Changed*, there is a crucial shift away from this typically "high" Modernist position. The text moves towards Postmodernist perspectives in which the struggle for unity and wholeness of being has become outdated. As the title of the work suggests, those depths where a fundamental reality is traditionally sought have "Changed". Though the epigraph challenges the reader to look into the crystal, to seek for truth, for "something" in the text, any further exploration shows that there is nothing there. A sense of radical indeterminacy, of irreducible multiplicity and utter instability of meaning, creates a dissensus echoing the breakdown of the grand theories traditionally grounding Western modes of thought. Poststructuralist textualism displaces the holistic certainties of Structuralist thought, that last defence of system and of a logically deducible depth-surface relationship.

It is for this reason that *Down Where Changed* does not bear the same sort of interpretative reading as I have practised on the other poems discussed in this thesis. There is no underlying meaning to be mined for. The work does not tease out and explore any coherent strand of argument. Rather, to quote from its own text, it may be described as an "inserted batch of fission" which "lacks its label"(p.308).

Down Where Changed refuses all totalising definitions. It is not clear whether the book is meant to be read as one long poem, or as a series of consecutive ones. The reader moves in an atmosphere of indeterminacy. As the opening poem perhaps implies, he is born along by the "idiot pear tree"(297), where to be an idiot is to be "so deficient in mental or intellectual faculty as to be incapable of ordinary acts of reasoning or rational conduct"(OED). This pear tree bears the speaker "the way wind does"(297), where conventionally the wind, De Vries(501) says, may evoke nothingness, madness, or destruction. Perhaps the wind is meant to evoke the breath of speech, in which case the phrase might suggest that, in reading this book one is born hither and thither by the vagaries of a language which is, in essence, incapable of purpose or rationality; a language which collapses into the madness of blustering winds. Indeed, as Anne Stevenson writes in a review of *Down Where Changed*, "the 'passion scribble' seems to have been swallowed up in effortful non-meaning".[7]

This is not to say, however, that an alert reader cannot pick up on certain recurrent allusions in the work, on certain repeated images which give the text a distinctive surface tension. The idea of crystal, for instance, first introduced in the epigraph, is picked up in the second poem and associated with the stars in the description of an "indole / outdoor"(298), where an "indole" is a "crystallisable substance...formed in large shining colourless lamellae"(OED). The poem re-echoes this stellar imagery in its use of the adjective "heliacal"(298), a word which describes a star "when it first emerges from the sun's rays and becomes visible before sunrise, or of its setting when it is last visible after sunset before being lost in the sun's rays"(OED). This in turn resonates with a recurrent imagery of twilight and darkness, the "darkman's pay and fall", the "candle light", the "night exposure" or the "dusk" as it "flickers / into orbit"(298). The word "orbit", as it may describe the "path or course of a heavenly body"(OED) links back to the stellar

imagery. Furthermore, as orbit may mean the "bony cavity of the skull containing the eye"(OED), it may also be seen to link up with the imagery of crystal in so far as the poem goes on to describe a "drusy eye"(301), an eye "covered or lined with a crust of minute crystals"(OED). This evocation of crystals then crosslinks back to notions of dusk and darkness in the words "extinction event"(300), where extinction may be defined as the "state or condition of darkness in a crystal placed in a polarised light between crossed nicols"(OED).

However, although these ideas twine through the text, they are not, I would argue, related to any integrated referential scheme which might elucidate the meanings. As the tangled strands emerge out of, and dissolve back into their textual matrix, nothing is explained. Nothing is made clear. *Down Where Changed* seems deliberately to subvert the "high" Modernist poetic of a work such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* in which recurrent imagery points towards a latent organic unity, a basically coherent symbolic structure.

Though certain passages in *Down Where Changed* focus momentarily on a particular theme, these themes remain unrelated in any way to the rest of the text and thus serve only to emphasise a radical fragmentariness. For instance, the following lines might be intended to evoke some sort of photographic process:

> Satisfied in the kodak gantry
> to scale and deliver the outline
> by soda ash they brought
>
> home the flash-cured bacon
> and are caught by candlelight
> according to fowler's gesture
>
> with the gut in lime slurry.
> (298)

Kodak is the proprietory name of a range of cameras. It may also refer, the *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes, to a photograph taken

by a kodak camera. It is this which "deliver[s] the outline" in that it produces the image. An image which it "scale[s]", in the sense that it "remove[s] the scales from"(OED) it, the layers which occlude an undeveloped print, perhaps. To "bring home the bacon" is to "succeed in an undertaking"(OED). Thus, to bring "home the flash-cured bacon" would seem to mean to succeed in taking a flash photograph. Perhaps, too, the poem implies that just as bacon is "cured" to make it last longer, so a "flash-cured" image perpetuates an otherwise transient scene. Further to this, the "candlelight" maybe evokes the dim light of the darkroom; or perhaps the picture taken was of a candlelit scene and hence the need for a flash. The "gut in lime slurry" may refer to the greenish murk on the developing paper as the image is slowly revealed. If the photograph is a portrait, the head and shoulders may be revealed whilst the lower parts, "the gut", are still obscured. Where a "gantry" is a "four-footed stand for barrels" or a "structure crossing several railway tracks to accomodate signals"(OED), it evokes, perhaps, a sense of structural ordering, and hence the rectangular framing of a photograph.

However, I would argue that although this tenuous thread of possible allusion seems to weave through this poem, somehow interconnecting its series of bewildering phrases, any sense of meaning remains always, and deliberately, obscure. Chains of interreferential imagery are intentionally vague, hinted themes barely emerge before dissolving back into an unrelated text. The images which, I have suggested, evoke the processes of photography, are so nebulous that a reader can never be sure if such an interpretation is nothing but a fanciful imposition.

Even in other parts of the book where events emerge with a momentarily striking clarity, semantic sense is persistently refused. The following passage uses scientific language to describe the way in which a tree seals off the passage of nutrients to its leaves in autumn:

As through its lentil abscess
sun tempers the fad in leaf-fall
by stunned silica the pass

is concessionary until soldered
across the output.
(p. 301)

However, although this representation seems momentarily lucid it remains totally disconnected from the encompassing text. The possibility of consistent semantic sense is refused. The image drifts unanchored. Rather than creating an impression of symbolic coherence it serves only to emphasise the fundamental fragmentariness of the text.

At times, *Down Where Changed* seems almost to demand that the reader look for meanings. "You'll get it given soon"(p.304) it says. "Think about it we must know / what this means"(p.307), or "You have to work it out"(p.308). The enigmatic text generates those impulses which make a reader yearn for completion and understanding, yet it simultaneously blocks these meanings at every turn. "[N]o sound / catches the binding dark"(306) the text says. "The rail is interfered with / it is cut up already"(299), is the only explanation offered. If the rail is taken as a metaphor for the sequences of rational causality and logic, the poem would emphatically seem to negate such forms of thought. Indeed, it later says:

there's no more to it
so out of true
the rail is sundered

I'm telling you.
(299)

Meaning can never be established. The text works through a simultaneous disclosure and concealment. Signification seems for a moment to crystallise out of solution, to begin to cohere, and then the whole thing subtly shifts, and the sense dissolves again. As the poem

itself puts it: "the whole procession / reshuffles into line"(304).

It is this pattern of opening and closing, this simultaneous revelation and reveiling which maintains the peculiar surface tension of the text and gives it vibrancy. Too much disclosure, Prynne seems to sense, produces contrivance; too much concealment produces unintelligibility and boredom. The text generates a sense of expectancy which keeps a reader's attention. It seems continually to suggest that the disclosure of some special meaning is imminent, yet its language never succumbs and reveals its secret. Rather, *Down Where Changed* remains, in John Ashbery's words, "an open field of narrative possibilities".[3]

To read such a text, Cardinal writes, "is like being given a key only to learn that the locks have been changed".[4] It is, as Marjorie Perloff puts it, rather like "overhearing a conversation in which one can make out individual words or phrases but has no clear idea what the speakers are talking about".[5] In *Down Where Changed* consistent psychological themes are constantly blocked. There is no stable symbolic centre, no coherent verbal universe to reflect, however obliquely, the external reality which lies beyond its parameters. Modernist nostalgia over origins is replaced by a dismissal of them. The "passion-scribble / of origin" is "swallowed up"(p.308). Longing for certainty is endlessly frustrated. It is replaced by notions of enigma, of the poem as a language construction in which the free play of possible significations replaces iconic representation.

Down Where Changed, though it may often sound deceptively reasonable and straightforward, seems to mock the seriousness of the explicator determined to unlock the door to the hidden meanings of the text.

> A limit spark under water
> makes you see briefly
> how patience is wasted
> (306)

declares one of the poems, but the reader cannot "see" why this should be so at all. The two concepts which this explanation parallels appear totally unrelated. Furthermore, it is unclear exactly what a "limit spark under water" is. The explanation promises a connection which doesn't exist. Similarly, where another poem says that:

> through that rule of thumb or plain
> work to rule to nail your way
> by forced rebuff,
>
> (309)

the reader does not know which "rule of thumb" is alluded to, nor can he understand what it is that this rule legislates. The explanatory explains nothing. Even when something would appear to be clearly defined, when the reader is told, for instance, that the "name / on the tag of the bed / is punctilious liquorice"(309), the definition fails to elucidate. The name remains enigmatical.

Down Where Changed creates an inscrutable verbal field in which the sense of subjectivity central to traditional philosophies of consciousness, is dissolved. Identity is fluid and fragmented. "Already you get torn up"(301), one poem says. Though the text is scattered with pronouns, a reader never knows who it is that is speaking. Who is it, for instance, who suddenly says: "I love the sober muse, and fasting"(298)? A later part of the text tells the reader what "you say"(301), but it is never clear who the "you" referred to is. Nor can one tell, in a phrase such as: "you're sent on station and / corrupted with excellence"(300), who is saying the words to whom, nor why they should be corrupted in this way. The people mentioned throughout the text are never identified. The reader may never know who are "Beryl"(301), the "creamy recruit"(302), the "sick man"(305), or "Amy"(307). Identity remains essentially elusive.

Relinquishing the epistemological doubts of a "high" Modernist poetic, *Down Where Changed* embraces instead the brute objectivity of

Postmodernism's random subjectivity. The Romantic distinction between subject and object dissolves. Indeed, as the Postmodernist poet, John Ashbery, writes:

> the personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. "You" can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing, and so can "he" and "she" for that matter and "we" ....it doesn't really matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what's the important thing at that particular moment.[6]

Down Where Changed comes to reflect an experience increasingly fluid and a world increasingly shapeless. Indeed, the world described appears to exist nowhere outside the text itself. Though parts of it are alluded to: the "wall plan"(298), the "wiper blades"(299), the "road"(299), the "traffic emerging from the right"(300), the "almond tree"(305), the "shadow of that room"(308), the "surveillance machines"(312), none of these parts seem to belong to an underlying totality. Neither the "footway"(299) nor the "lurid airways"(300), neither the "rail"(299) nor the "tarmac"(299), neither the "muddy roots"(302) nor the "hedges"(306), can link one bit of this inexplicable realm to another. The "NHS cathedral" and the "stupendous balkans"(299) have no relation to each other nor to the "pin" that is "Egypt"(311). There seems to be no whole to connect these disparate oddments.

In a world that is radically fragmented, connectives become useless. Though they may create expectations of causality and relatedness, the narrative never fulfills them. In the passage:

> the pin
> is Egypt and sticks but the entire

boil-up in possession runs over
a second-hand illness. (311)

the preposition, "but", connects two totally unrelated concepts. Similarly, in the lines: "and suffer / the play at choking / or not turning away"(306), it is hard to see why one idea provides an alternative to the other, the two seem so utterly disparate.

Down Where Changed establishes discontinuity as its fundamental rule. It seems, paradoxically, to use the absence of organisation as the very principle of its organisation. Images refuse to cohere. Why is it that "[t]hat bend" which is "too bad" is described as "magnanimous / like a hot-air balloon"(299)? The two things have nothing to do with each other. What does it mean for a rail to be "done / as a praline"(299)? Why should coldness be equated with ginger in the simile: "Chill to the neck / as revealed ginger"(310)? And why is the "watch" that is "busted all over" said to be "like the snivelled rag"(312)? Images, usually used to clarify a meaning, explain nothing. The symbolic stucture of the poem is irredeemably shattered. The image is detatched from its referent.

The mimetic illusion of the poem is deliberately destroyed. As Gombrich writes in his discussion of the Cubists:

> if illusion is due to the interaction of clues and the absence of contradictory evidence, the only way to fight its transforming influence is to make the clues contradict each other and to prevent a coherent picture of reality from destroying the pattern in the plane.[7]

Down Where Changed, introduces an irreducible ambiguity into its text. In his earlier poem, "The Numbers", Prynne suggests that "we should conserve / by election"(11). He suggests that in order to "elect terms / to be the ground for names"(11-12), the principle of choice is necessary. The poem seems to allude to the binary oppositions which are conventionally seen to structure language. Now, with the radical

indeterminacy of *Down Where Changed*, this choice is negated. As the text itself says: "either nut juggles"(298). There is a radical ambiguity. How can, for example, "harsh streams of air" be "too soft to burn right"(299), when harsh is by definition "disagreeably hard and rough to the touch"(OED), and soft is "pressure... producing agreeable or pleasant sensations... presenting a yielding surface to the touch"(OED). The text does not merely present a Modernist frustration at being unable to resolve dilemmas. It moves beyond this, giving itself up to an acceptance of the impossibility of ever making any sense whatsoever of the world as a whole. "[Y]ou must know", it says:

> how the voice sways out of time
> into double image, neither one true
> a way not seen and not unseen.
> (304)

"What do you say then", the final poem asks, "well yes and no / about four times a day"(313).

With this recognition that meaning is radically indeterminate, the poem moves towards what Baudrillard describes as the growing autonomy of the signified.[8] The arbitrary relation of word and world is underscored to produce an aesthetic of the "new sentence" free of customary reference. The poem establishes itself firmly in that poetic tradition which stems from the anti-Symbolist mode of Rimbaud. As Jean-Pierre Richard writes:

> Rimbaud rejects all manifestations of depth, and it is this which marks his real divorce from Baudelaire, his visions display themselves on a shallow screen, film strips, supremely thin and yet unbreakable for there is nothing behind them, neither volume nor abyss nor being nor nothingness nor god nor the infinite.[9]

Down Where Changed flaunts the depthless materiality of its textual surface. Demonstrative pronouns have no referents. "[T]hose duties too

are / born to amuse and choke"(300), one poem says, but no "duties" have been mentioned. The text repeatedly points to things but never explains what they are. "[Y]ou liken this to that"(305), it says, but it is unclear what the demonstratives gesture towards. "[O]f course the thing is / this one"(308), the speaker seems to explain, but neglects to specify what this "thing" is. There is no sense that the surfaces of language allude to something "real", something anterior to, or underlying, the text.

The work subverts a metaphysics of presence. As the text recognises that there is nothing to uncover, only surfaces to inhabit, the signifier comes to swamp the signified. Although grammatical construction is often simple, although the phrases frequently appear as ordinary subject-predicate units, this very normality of construction comes to make the unrelatedness of the words puzzling. What does it mean, for instance, for "love-cramp" to wash the "tarmac"(299)? Or how do you "Give yourself exit pallor"(300)? Why are "All the hedges...paid for"(306), and how can one interpret the phrase "some hero strokes / the flame with a wet trimming"(307)?

Similarly, though words may remain in their correct syntactic slots, they are often inappropriate. For instance in the phrase: "To be at home is no quicker / than far off"(306), the adverb is manifestly the wrong one to describe the state of being at home. Or where something is described as "too soft to burn right"(299), the adjective does not serve to explain why something will not burn.

Where syntactical position doesn't explain meaning each word can resonate with many possible interpretations. Is the word "graft", for example, in: "call the day graft / a sweet cheat"(298), meant to evoke its horticultural meaning of a "shoot or scion inserted in a groove or slit made in another stock"(OED), or is it that graft which is the "obtaining of profit or advantage by dishonest or shady means"(OED), or could it even refer to its slang sense of "hard work"(OED)? The reader cannot

even be sure whether the word is used as a noun or a verb. The syntax does not function to tell us which of the possible meanings is the appropriate one in the context. The text gives itself over to a radical plurality embodying a Postmodernist entropy.

Down Where Changed thus shifts its focus from "high" Modernist signification to a Postmodernist play of signifiers. In such lines as "white at the foot of green / still white, ever green"(302), the words have no definable meaning within the context of the poem. Their value is compositional rather than referential. All depth of meaning is inevitably subverted.

Postmodernism recognises all metanarrative to be exhausted. A culture of detached images comes to suffocate and outclone the real world, ousting old fashioned relationships of the image to the real. *Down Where Changed* often speaks explicity through the reformulation of existing discourse. Acknowledging its implication in a pre-existing textuality it displaces the secure perspective of a stable vantage point from outside. A description of a lark rising over the sea(303), for example, seems to echo the extended similes of the classical epics. The passage:

> and in the shadow of that room
> we hear the shallow call to deep
> and fail the test, and miss our doom

might be construed as a parody of the high Victorian poetic of Tennyson's "In Memoriam", whilst the line "in his end is my beginning"(307) would seem deliberately to ape Eliot's "Little Gidding".[10] "[N]ever stop for brow-ache / or wait to lick the spoon"(304), evokes the tone of a proverb, whilst "Pilgrim, pilgrim stop your plight / the watch is busted all over"(312), seems to echo some traditional nursery-rhyme chant.

Similarly, the text is a collage of vocabulary taken from different

discourses. The technical scientific vocabulary of "gantry"(298), "heliacal"(298), or "carbide"(311); the slang of "darkmans"(298), "graft"(300) or "keep cool and take your time"(309); the foreign languages of "Kristallnacht"(300), "Trauersaft"(303), or "*al dente*"(302); or the proper names of "Kodak"(298), "Everyman"(301) and the "NHS"(303). *Down Where Changed* adopts the parodic style typical of Postmodernism. Indeed, parody is a perfect Postmodern form, writes Linda Hutcheon,

> for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies...[and] forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin and originality that is compatible with other postmodernist interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions.[11]

In *Down Where Changed* there is a loss of emotional content and of objective or critical distance. The past is recoverable only as pastiche. The text may be seen as some sort of heteroglossia of intercultural exchange. Discourse across the arts, sciences, and mass forms, are montaged, blended and blurred together. Man, the poem seems to recognise, lives in a Postmodern world, constituted through multiple kinds of discourse or language games that contradict and contest each other even as they complement or are constructed out of each other.

The text is reduced to what Lyotard[12] sees as a network of language games in which the criteria are those of performance rather than "truth". The utter indecision about meanings amounts to a willingness to live with a world that is random and multiple. The text embodies the full purposelessness of human existence. One poem is nothing but an unpunctuated list of words: adverbs, pronouns, or adjectives, connectives with no syntactical function. Signification is deliberately negated in favour of a radically fragmented textual surface:

at all
anyway
whatever

even so

rubbish
(307)

The final word, "rubbish", seems to exult in the meaninglessness, to celebrate the quintessential nonsensicality of the universe. *Down Where Changed* ends with the lines:

sick and nonplussed
by the thought of less
you say stuff it.
(313)

The text confronts the senseless enigma of the human situation, and abandoning any nostalgia for the metaphysical truths once believed to validate existence, abandoning the illusions with which man once defended himself from acknowledgement of his own purposelessness, it says "stuff it". Where the poems previously discussed in this thesis have struggled towards an apprehension of fundamental truths, towards a metaphysics of presence, now, in *Down Where Changed* the search for any justification of existence is abandoned. All sense, even of a lost authenticity, has vanished. Ontological uncertainty is confirmed in a rejection of all foundationalist notions and a surrendering to the chaos of a superficial, centreless world.

However, I would argue, this negation of a discoverable foundational reality does not necessarily amount to a categorical denial of the existence of any possible space or realm outside the text. Though all Prynne's work has been concerned with the fact that conscious conceptualisation is essentially inscribed within a linguistic sign system, this is not necessarily to say that Prynne therefore refuses the possibility

of any realm of "otherness", any world of the "real" outside this linguistic system. Rather, he seems only to acknowledge that this space can never be apprehended by consciousness as it is essentially formulated within language.

It is in this light that it is interesting to look at the work of Lyotard, often considered one of the leading apologists of the Postmodern movement. Lyotard, in his essay, "From Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?", invokes the notion of the "sublime" outlined by Kant in his third critique, "The Critique of Judgement". Kant divides the human mind into three faculties: understanding, reason and judgement. The laws of the understanding, he explains, are those which man imposes upon his phenomenal experience of the world. All knowledge is determined by the concepts formed by means of the understanding, which is applied to the sensory world through the imagination in its capacity to form images. Against this concept, Kant then sets the "idea", the product of the highest faculty of the mind, reason. The "idea" is so far removed from the phenomenal world that it cannot find conceptual or sensory embodiment in it. Instead it serves as an ideal which man can never experience, let alone conceptualise.

Sublimity, as Kant sees it, is that experience of an object which invokes an idea of reason, but an idea which is so radically indeterminate that man can never formulate or conceptualise it. Kant writes:

> the feeling of the sublime may appear in point of form to contravene the ends of our power of judgement, to be ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and to be, as it were, an outrage on the imagination, and yet it is judged all the more sublime on that account.[13]

As Patricia Waugh explains: "The sublime transcends every faculty of sense, taunts us with a glimpse of inaccessible plenitude and leaves us with the impossible self-conscious wrestle with words in the hopeless

struggle to embody it".[14]

It is this Kantian notion of the sublime which the Postmodernist critic, Lyotard, invokes and extends. Lyotard acknowledges that there may indeed be a space of "otherness", a realm of the "real", but emphasises that it does not depend in any way upon man's constructions of it. This space remains "sublime". Modern aesthetics are, he suggests, an aesthetic of the sublime. However, he makes a contradistinction between what I have termed the "high" Modernist aesthetic, and the Postmodernist one. The former, he explains, is nostalgic for the sublime. It allows the unpresentable sublime to be "put forward...as the missing contents".[15] For instance, in Prynne's "high" Modernist poem, "The Common Gain, Reverted", the sublime is evoked through the image of the "void", through allusion to that which is absent. In contradistinction to this, Lyotard explains, a Postmodern poetic "puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself".[16] It renounces all nostalgic yearning for a correspondence between human constructions and that which is "real" or "true", alluding instead to that which does not allow itself to be made present. It paradoxically makes visible that which cannot be conceived, that which cannot be apprehended or made visible. Indeed, Lyotard writes, Kant himself implies this when:

> he names "formlessness, the absence of form", as a possible index to the unpresentable. He also says of the empty "abstraction" which the imagination experiences when in search for a presentation of the infinite, (another unpresentable): this abstraction itself is like a presentation of the infinite, its "negative presentation". He cites the commandment, "Thou shalt not make graven images" (*Exodus*), as the most sublime passage in the Bible in that it forbids all presentation of the Absolute.[17]

In the light of this theory, I would argue, the empty abstraction of Prynne's *Down Where Changed*, the purposeless play of its meaningless signifiers, appears paradoxically to present the unpresentable sublime.

Lyotard's notion of the sublime seems to reinterpret the Postmodern as some new form of Romanticism. He disparages that viewpoint which represents Postmodernism as little more than some spurious legitimation of a culture of cheap kitsch. Rather, Lyotard sees in the Postmodern, as in the Romantic, expression of the sublime, a form of resistance to the banal and automatising effects of modern life. The language games of the aesthetic attain a value as modes of dissensus which motivate man with a desire to pass beyond that which can be analysed or rationally conceived. They offer man, Patricia Waugh explains, "a continual sense of the 'as if' "[18] Indeed, the distinguishing feature of Postmodernist deconstruction with its dynamic processes of simultaneous inscription and erasure, is the continual deferral, rather than the affirmation or denial, of meaning. As Prynne himself writes in *Down Where Changed*:

> and the joke metal turns
> just out of sight
> for ever and ever and ever.
> (313)

The whole is seen as an ever-ongoing, ever-incompleted process. The sublime remains a never-to-be-realised beyond, transcending every faculty of sense. It can never be integrated into conceptual paradigms, into the sign systems which inscribe human consciousness.

In the light of this Lyotardian view it could be argued that a Postmodern aesthetic, developed principally in America, via the work of French theorists such as Derrida or Kristeva, is reintegrated back into the Romantic traditions which have essentially shaped the English poetic. I would argue that Prynne does not present Postmodernism simply as as a complicity with the commodified surfaces of a consumerist society. The "high" Modernist poems which I have discussed in this thesis have seemed to struggle to apprehend that which transcends conscious conceptualisation. I would suggest then that it is as a culmination of their thought that Prynne's *Down Where Changed* may

be read. Radically heterogenous, non-harmonious and discontinuous, this Postmodernist text resists all integration into available concepts, and thus may be construed as some sort of paradoxical presentation of a sublime which remains radically separate from conceptual understanding.

Romantic poetic articulation situates itself in a position of penultimacy. "Our destiny, our nature, and our home / Is with infinitude", writes Wordsworth in *The Prelude*. But this "infinitude" refuses the constructs of conscious conceptualisation. It remains sublime. As Wordsworth goes on to suggest, man may only ever find himself in a position of "hope.../ and expectation, and desire" for "something evermore about to be".[19] He may only ever situate himself at the brink of that imaginary plenitude, that transcendent fullness which would dissolve all human sense of division and incompleteness.

It is this position of penultimacy which, I would argue, Prynne's *Down Where Changed* also articulates. Prynne's poetry has recognised human consciousness to be necessarily inscribed within language and hence incapable of apprehending transcendence. It has recognised man to be situated within, and thus formed by, a contemporary Postmodernist culture which negates all notions of apprehendable truth. However, this does not necessarily mean that his work refuses all notions of ultimate truth. Rather, if Prynne's philosophies are interpreted in the light of Lyotardian notions of the sublime, it could be said that his very adoption of a Postmodernist aesthetic places man in that penultimate position which is described with such poignancy by the Romantic poets. Prynne does not positively affirm a belief in the sublime, but rather offers man the option of belief. Despite a recognition that man may never conceptualise the sublime, the sublime it is not, therefore, necessarily refused.

Down Where Changed closes with the lines:

sick and nonplussed
by the thought of less
you say stuff it.
(313)

This ending is essentially ambiguous. The tone of resignation could be construed as an indication that the reader is to abandon his struggle for meaning and accept the random surfaces of a depthless play of signifiers. Alternatively the lines could be meant to suggest that one should abandon the linguistic system, abandon the divisions and eternal incompleteness of a representative language which necessarily preclude man from from undivided being, from an apprehension of that absolute which eludes all language. Prynne never makes it clear what these lines should mean. The sublime is only offered as one further option for man as he recognises himself to be inscribed within a Postmodernist culture in which all definitive meaning is negated.

In blending a Postmodernist aesthetic as it had been developed principally in America, into an essentially English poetic stemming from Romantic traditions, Prynne's work refreshes and rejuvenates the forms of contemporary British poetry. It elaborates a philosophical position which implicitly questions the paradigms of traditional thought. Prynne provides a critique of any claim to a perspective or vantage point which is transcendent or stands outside the objects of its consideration. Even if some other realm of values exists, even if there is a sublime, it may never be translated into available historical forms of representation, nor may it function as the basis for epistemological critique.

Through the Postmodernist aesthetic of *Down Where Changed*, Prynne challenges the reductive and restrictive representational forms of traditional discursive formulations. It effects a type of conceptual liberation which has always been the function of art. Postmodernism may be seen as an authentic exposure of the illusions of preceding systems of knowledge and representation. It reformulates the modes of

the past in the light of a present in which recognition of a consumerist culture does not necessarily amount to a capitulation to it. *Down Where Changed* offers an alternative discourse to further challenge the consensus of opinion and expose the processes by which legitimation of ideas is conventionally achieved. It is, in John Cage's words, a "purposeless play", "waking [us] up to the life we're living".[20]

If Prynne's work, as it has been discussed in this thesis, has been concerned with a progressive exploration of the existential predicament of man, *Down Where Changed*, seems to open up the mind to a new and fresh apprehension of this predicament. The Postmodernist aesthetic seems to directly address the questions of human existence.

In his essay, "Coleridge as Critic", Herbert Read calls Coleridge "one of the earliest exponents of existentialist philosophy". "Before Kierkegaard was born", Read writes, "Coleridge had already formulated the terms of an existentialist philosophy".[21] In *The Friend*, Coleridge asks:

> Hast thou ever raised thy mind to the consideration of EXISTENCE, in and by itself, as the mere act of existing? Hast thou ever said to thyself, thoughtfully IT IS! heedless in that moment, whether it were a man before thee, or a flower, or a grain of sand? Without reference, in short, to this or that particular mode or form of existence? If thou hast attained to this, thou wilt have felt the presence of a mystery, which must have fixed thy spirit in awe and wonder. The very words, There is nothing! or, There was a time when there was nothing! are self contradictory. There is that within us which repels the proposition with as full and instantaneous a light, as if it bore evidence against the fact in the right of its own eternity.[22]

Prynne's poetry, I would conclude, does indeed raise itself to a consideration of "EXISTENCE". It directly addresses those questions posited by the Romantic poet, Coleridge. English poetic traditions are rooted in a Romantic tradition. Prynne, I would argue, introduces an

essentially contemporary mode of thought into this tradition. He searches for new and innovative ways to approach those fundamental existential dilemmas which lie at the root of all philosophies of consciousness.

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6. See Janet Bloom and Robert Losada, "Craft Interview with John Ashbery", *New York Quarterly*, 9 (Winter, 1972), pp.24-25.
7. E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, The A.W. Mellon Lectures in Fine Arts, 1956 (New York: Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series 35, 1960), pp.281-282.
8. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchmen (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
9. Jean-Pierre Richard, *Poésie et Profondeur* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1955), p.240.
10. See T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding", V, lines 1-2, in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p.197.
11. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p.11.
12. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).
13. Emanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, translated by J.C. Meredith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p.245.
14. Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism, Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), p.27.
15. Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?", Translated by Régis Durand, Reprinted in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) p.81
16. Ibid., p.81.
17. Ibid., p.78.
18. Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism, Reading Modernism*, p.31.
19. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, VI lines 538-542, in *William Wordsworth*, edited by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.464.
20. John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p.12.

21. Herbert Read, "Coleridge as Critic" in *The True Voice of Feeling: Studies in English Romantic Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p180, p.181.
22. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend* edited by Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) I, p.514.

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